

NOTES ON VARIOUS PEOPLES OF THE HYBORIAN

AGE _____ Aquilonians _____ This was a more or less pure-blooded race, though modified by contact with the Zingarans in the south and, much less extensively, with the Bossonians of the west and north. Aquilonia, as the westernmost of the Hyborian kingdoms, retained frontier traditions equalled only by the more ancient kingdom of Hyperborea and the Border Kingdom. Its most important provinces were Poitain in the south, Gunderland in the north, and Attalus in the southeast. The Aquilonians were a tall race, averaging five feet, ten and three-fourths inches in height, and were generally inclined to be rangy, though in the last generations the city dwellers inclined towards portliness. They varied in complexion largely according to locality. Thus the people of Gunderland were uniformly tawny-haired and gray-eyed, while the people of Poitain were almost uniformly dark as their neighbors the Zingarans. All were inclined to be dolichocephalic, except a sprinkling of peasantry along the Bossonian border, whose type had been modified by admixture with the latter race, and here and there in the more primitive parts of the kingdom where remnants of unclassified aboriginal races still existed, absorbed into the surrounding population. The people of Attalus boasted the greatest advances in commerce and culture, though the whole level of Aquilonian civilization was enviable. Their language was much like the other Hyborian tongues and their chief god was Mitra. At the height of their power their religion was of a refined and imaginative type, and they did not practise human sacrifice. In war they relied largely upon their cavalry, heavily armed knights. Their pikemen and spearmen were mainly Gundermen, while their archers were supplied from the Bossonian Marches. _____ Gundermen _____ Gunderland was once a separate kingdom, but was brought into the larger kingdom, less by conquest than agreement. Its people never considered themselves exactly Aquilonians, and after the fall of the great kingdom, Gunderland existed for several generations in its former state as a separate principality. Their ways were ruder and more primitively Hyborian than those of the Aquilonians, and their main concession to the ways of their more civilized southern neighbors was the adoption of the god Mitra in place of the primitive Bori - a worship to which they returned, however, upon the fall of Aquilonia. They were, next to the Hyperboreans, the tallest of the Hyborian races. They were fine soldiers, and inclined to wander far. Gunderland mercenaries were to be found in all the armies of the Hyborian kingdoms, and in Zamora and the more powerful kingdoms of Shem. _____ Cimmerians _____ These people were descendants of the ancient Atlanteans, though they themselves were unaware of their descent, having evolved by their own efforts from the ape-men to which their ancient ancestors had sunk. They were a tall, powerful race, averaging six feet in height. They were black-haired, and gray-or blue-eyed. They were dolichocephalic, and dark-skinned, though not so dark as either the Zingarans, Zamorians or Picts. They were barbaric and warlike, and were never conquered, although, at the end of the Hyborian Age, the southward-drifting Nordics drove them from their country. They were a moody, brooding race, whose gods were Crom and his brood. They did not practise human sacrifice, for it was their belief that their gods were indifferent to the fate of men. They fought on foot, mainly, and made savage raids on their neighbors to the east, north, and south. _____ The Westermarck _____ Located between the Bossonian Marches and the Pictish Wilderness. Provinces: Thandara, Conawaga, Oriskonie, Schohira. Political situation: Oriskonie, Conawaga, and

Schohira were ruled by royal patent. Each was under the jurisdiction of a baron of the western marches, which lie just east of the Bossonian Marches. These barons were accountable only to the king of Aquilonia. Theoretically they owned the land, and received a certain percentage of the gain. In return they supplied troops to protect the frontier against the Picts, built fortresses and towns, and appointed judges and other officials. Actually their power was not nearly so absolute as it seemed. There was a sort of supreme court located in the largest town of Conawaga, Scan-aga, presided over by a judge appointed directly by the king of Aquilonia, and it was a defendant's privilege, under certain circumstances, to appeal to this court. Thandara was the southernmost province, Oriskonie the northernmost and the most thinly settled. Conawaga lay south of Oriskonie, and south of Conawaga lay Schohira, the smallest of the provinces. Conawaga was the largest, richest and most thickly settled, and the only one in which landed patricians had settled to any extent. Thandara was the most purely pioneer province. Originally it had only been a fortress by that name, on Warhorse River, built by direct order of the king of Aquilonia, and commanded by royal troops. After the conquest of the province of Conajohara by the Picts, the settlers from that province moved southward and settled the country in the vicinity of the fortress. They held their land by force of arms, and neither received nor needed any patent. They acknowledged no baron as overlord. Their governor was merely a military commander, elected from among themselves, their choice being always submitted to and approved by the king of Aquilonia as a matter of form. No troops were ever sent to Thandara. They built forts, or rather blockhouses, and manned them themselves, and formed companies of military bodies called Rangers. They were incessantly at war with the Picts. When the word came that Aquilonia was being torn by civil war, and that the Cimmerian Conan was striking for the crown, Thandara instantly declared for Conan, renounced their allegiance to King Namedides and sent word asking Conan to endorse their elected governor, which the Cimmerian instantly did. This enraged the commander of a fort in the Bossonian Marches, and he marched with his host to ravage Thandara. But the frontiersmen met him at their borders and gave him a savage defeat, after which there was no attempt to meddle with Thandara. But the province was isolated, separated from Schohira by a stretch of uninhabited wilderness, and behind them lay the Bossonian country, where most of the people were loyalists. The baron of Schohira declared for Conan, and marched to join his army, but asked no levies of Schohira where indeed every man was needed to guard the frontier. But in Conawaga were many loyalists, and the baron of Conawaga rode in person into Scandaga and demanded that the people supply him with a force to ride and aid King Namedides. There was civil war in Conawaga, and the baron planned to crush all other provinces and make himself governor of them all. Meantime, in Oriskonie, the people had driven out the governor appointed by their baron and were savagely righting such loyalists as skulked among them. _____RED NAILS_____1 The Skull on the Crag_____The woman on the horse reined in her weary steed. It stood with its legs wide-braced, its head drooping, as if it found even the weight of the gold-tassled, red-leather bridle too heavy. The woman drew a booted foot out of the silver stirrup and swung down from the gilt-worked saddle. She made the reins fast to the fork of a sapling, and turned about, hands on her hips, to survey her surroundings.____They were not inviting. Giant trees hemmed in the small pool where her horse had just drunk. Clumps of undergrowth limited the vision that quested under the somber twilight of the lofty arches formed by intertwining

branches. The woman shivered with a twitch of her magnificent shoulders, and then cursed.____She was tall, full-bosomed and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflected an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She was all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter were incongruous, a view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceased a hand's breadth short of her knees, and were upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather came almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completed her costume. On one shapely hip she wore a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, was confined by a band of crimson satin.____Against the background of somber, primitive forest she posed with an unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place.____She should have been posed against a background of sea-clouds, painted masts and wheeling gulls. There was the color of the sea in her wide eyes. And that was as it should have been, because this was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.____She strove to pierce the sullen green roof of the arched branches and see the sky which presumably lay about it, but presently gave it up with a muttered oath.____Leaving her horse tied she strode off toward the east, glancing back toward the pool from time to time in order to fix her route in her mind. The silence of the forest depressed her. No birds sang in the lofty boughs, nor did any rustling in the bushes indicate the presence of any small animals. For leagues she had traveled in a realm of brooding stillness, broken only by the sounds of her own flight.____She had slaked her thirst at the pool, but she felt the gnawings of hunger and began looking about for some of the fruit on which she had sustained herself since exhausting the food she had brought in her saddlebags.____Ahead of her, presently, she saw an outcropping of dark, flint-like rock that sloped upward into what looked like a rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit was lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rose above the tree-tops, and from it she could see what lay beyond - if, indeed, anything lay beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which she had ridden for so many days.____A narrow ridge formed a natural ramp that led up the steep face of the crag. After she had ascended some fifty feet she came to the belt of leaves that surrounded the rock. The trunks of the trees did not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extended about it, veiling it with their foliage. She groped on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below her; but presently she glimpsed blue sky, and a moment later came out in the clear, hot sunlight and saw the forest roof stretching away under her feet.____She was standing on a broad shelf which was about even with the tree-tops, and from it rose a spire-like jut that was the ultimate peak of the crag she had climbed. But something else caught her attention in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpeted the shelf. She kicked them aside and looked down on the skeleton of a man. She ran an experienced eye over the bleached frame, but saw no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die she could not imagine.____She scrambled up to the summit of the spire and looked toward the horizons. The forest roof- which looked like a floor from her vantage-point - was just as impenetrable as from below. She could not even see the pool by which she had left her horse. She glanced northward, in the direction from which she had come. She

saw only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with only a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill-range she had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste. ___West and east the view was the same; though the blue hill-line was lacking in those directions. But when she turned her eyes southward she stiffened and caught her breath. A mile away in that direction the forest thinned out and ceased abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that plain rose the walls and towers of a city. Valeria swore in amazement. This passed belief. She would not have been surprised to sight human habitations of another sort - the beehive-shaped huts of the black people, or the cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown race which legends declared inhabited some country of this unexplored region. But it was a startling experience to come upon a walled city here so many long weeks' march from the nearest outposts of any sort of civilization. ___Her hands tiring from clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, she let herself down on the shelf, frowning in indecision. She had come far - from the camp of the mercenaries by the border town of Sukhmet amidst the level grasslands, where desperate adventurers of many races guard the Stygian frontier against the raids that come up like a red wave from Darfar. Her flight had been blind, into a country of which she was wholly ignorant. And now she wavered between an urge to ride directly to that city in the plain, and the instinct of caution which prompted her to skirt it widely and continue her solitary flight. ___Her thoughts were scattered by the rustling of the leaves below her. She wheeled cat-like, snatched at her sword; and then she froze motionless, staring wide-eyed at the man before her. ___He was almost a giant in stature, muscles rippling smoothly under his skin which the sun had burned brown. His garb was similar to hers, except that he wore a broad leather belt instead of a girdle. Broadsword and poniard hung from this belt. ___'Conan, the Cimmerian!' ejaculated the woman. 'What are you doing on my trail?' ___He grinned hardily, and his fierce blue eyes burned with a light any woman could understand as they ran over her magnificent figure, lingering on the swell of her splendid breasts beneath the light shirt, and the clear white flesh displayed between breeches and boot-tops. ___'Don't you know?' he laughed. 'Haven't I made my admiration for you plain ever since I first saw you?' ___'A stallion could have made it no plainer,' she answered disdainfully. 'But I never expected to encounter you so far from the ale-barrels and meat-pots of Sukhmet. Did you really follow me from Zarallo's camp, or were you whipped forth for a rogue?' ___He laughed at her insolence and flexed his mighty biceps. ___'You know Zarallo didn't have enough knaves to whip me out of camp,' he grinned. 'Of course I followed you. Lucky thing for you, too, wench! When you knifed that Stygian officer, you forfeited Zarallo's favor and protection, and you outlawed yourself with the Stygians.' ___'I know it,' she replied sullenly. 'But what else could I do? You know what my provocation was.' ___'Sure,' he agreed. 'If I'd been there, I'd have knifed him myself. But if a woman must live in the war-camps of men, she can expect such things.' ___Valeria stamped her booted foot and swore. ___'Why won't men let me live a man's life?' ___'That's obvious!' Again his eager eyes devoured her. 'But you were wise to run away. The Stygians would have had you skinned. That officer's brother followed you; faster than you thought, I don't doubt. He wasn't far behind you when I caught up with him. His horse was better than yours. He'd have caught you and cut your throat within a few more miles.' ___'Well?' she demanded. ___'Well what?' He seemed puzzled. ___'What of the Stygian?' ___'Why, what do you suppose?' he returned impatiently. 'I

killed him, of course, and left his carcass for the vultures. That delayed me, though, and I almost lost your trail when you crossed the rocky spurs of the hills. Otherwise I'd have caught up with you long ago.'___'And now you think you'll drag me back to Zarallo's camp?' she sneered.___'Don't talk like a fool,' he grunted. 'Come, girl, don't be such a spitfire. I'm not like that Stygian you knifed, and you know it.'___'A penniless vagabond,' she taunted.___He laughed at her.___'What do you call yourself? You haven't enough money to buy a new seat for your breeches. Your disdain doesn't deceive me. You know I've commanded bigger ships and more men than you ever did in your life. As for being penniless - what rover isn't, most of the time? I've squandered enough gold in the sea-ports of the world to fill a galleon. You know that, too.'___'Where are the fine ships and the bold lads you commanded, now?' she sneered.___'At the bottom of the sea, mostly,' he replied cheerfully. 'The Zingarans sank my last ship off the Shemite shore - that's why I joined Zarallo's Free Companions. But I saw I'd been stung when we marched to the Darfar border. The pay was poor and the wine was sour, and I don't like black women. And that's the only kind that came to our camp at Sukhmet - rings in their noses and their teeth filed - bah! Why did you join Zarallo's? Sukhmet's a long way from salt water.'___'Red Ortho wanted to make me his mistress,' she answered sullenly. 'I jumped overboard one night and swam ashore when we were anchored off the Kushite coast. Off Zabhela, it was. There a Shemite trader told me that Zarallo had brought his Free Companies south to guard the Darfar border. No better employment offered. I joined an eastbound caravan and eventually came to Sukhmet.'___'It was madness to plunge southward as you did,' commented Conan, 'but it was wise, too, for Zarallo's patrols never thought to look for you in this direction. Only the brother of the man you killed happened to strike your trail.'___'And now what do you intend doing?' she demanded.___'Turn west,' he answered. 'I've been this far south, but not this far east. Many days' traveling to the west will bring us to the open savannas, where the black tribes graze their cattle. I have friends among them. We'll get to the coast and find a ship. I'm sick of the jungle.'___'Then be on your way,' she advised. 'I have other plans.'___'Don't be a fool!' He showed irritation for the first time. 'You can't keep on wandering through this forest.'___'I can if I choose.'___'But what do you intend doing?'___'That's none of your affair,' she snapped.___'Yes, it is,' he answered calmly. 'Do you think I've followed you this far, to turn around and ride off empty-handed? Be sensible, wench. I'm not going to harm you.'___He stepped toward her, and she sprang back, whipping out her sword.___'Keep back, you barbarian dog! I'll spit you like a roast pig!'___He halted, reluctantly, and demanded: 'Do you want me to take that toy away from you and spank you with it?'___'Words! Nothing but words!' she mocked, lights like the gleam of the sun on blue water dancing in her reckless eyes.___He knew it was the truth. No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of conflicting emotions. He was angry, yet he was amused and filled with admiration for her spirit. He burned with eagerness to seize that splendid figure and crush it in his iron arms, yet he greatly desired not to hurt the girl. He was torn between a desire to shake her soundly, and a desire to caress her. He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was as quick and ferocious as a tigress. He could draw his broadsword and disarm her, beat the blade

out of her hand, but the thought of drawing a sword on a woman, even without intent of injury, was extremely repugnant to him. ___ 'Blast your soul, you hussy!' he exclaimed in exasperation. 'I'm going to take off your? ___ He started toward her, his angry passion making him reckless, and she poised herself for a deadly thrust. Then came a startling interruption to a scene at once ludicrous and perilous. ___ 'What's that?' ___ It was Valeria who exclaimed, but they both started violently, and Conan wheeled like a cat, his great sword flashing into his hand. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams - the screams of horses in terror and agony. Mingled with their screams there came the snap of splintering bones. ___ 'Lions are slaying the horses!' cried Valeria. ___ 'Lions, nothing!' snorted Conan, his eyes blazing. 'Did you hear a lion roar? Neither did I! Listen at those bones snap - not even a lion could make that much noise killing a horse.' ___ He hurried down the natural ramp and she followed, their personal feud forgotten in the adventurers' instinct to unite against common peril. The screams had ceased when they worked their way downward through the green veil of leaves that brushed the rock. ___ 'I found your horse tied by the pool back there,' he muttered, treading so noiselessly that she no longer wondered how he had surprised her on the crag. 'I tied mine beside it and followed the tracks of your boots. Watch, now!' ___ They had emerged from the belt of leaves, and stared down into the lower reaches of the forest. Above them the green roof spread its dusky canopy. Below them the sunlight filtered in just enough to make a jade-tinted twilight. The giant trunks of trees less than a hundred yards away looked dim and ghostly. ___ 'The horses should be beyond that thicket, over there,' whispered Conan, and his voice might have been a breeze moving through the branches. 'Listen!' ___ Valeria had already heard, and a chill crept through her veins; so she unconsciously laid her white hand on her companion's muscular brown arm. From beyond the thicket came the noisy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast. ___ 'Lions wouldn't make that noise,' whispered Conan. 'Something's eating our horses, but it's not a lion - Crom!' ___ The noise stopped suddenly, and Conan swore softly. A suddenly risen breeze was blowing from them directly toward the spot where the unseen slayer was hidden. ___ 'Here it comes!' muttered Conan, half lifting his sword. ___ The thicket was violently agitated, and Valeria clutched Conan's arm hard. Ignorant of jungle-lore she yet knew that no animal she had ever seen could have shaken the tall brush like that. ___ 'It must be as big as an elephant,' muttered Conan, echoing her thought. 'What the devil?' His voice trailed away in stunned silence. ___ Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly at the petrified humans clinging to the rock above it. Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth. ___ The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated back-bone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind. ___ 'Back up the crag, quick!' snapped Conan, thrusting the girl behind him. 'I don't think he can climb, but he can stand on his hind-legs and reach us?' ___ With a snapping and rending of bushes and

saplings the monster came hurtling through the thickets, and they fled up the rock before him like leaves blown before a wind. As Valeria plunged into the leafy screen a backward glance showed her the Titan rearing up fearsomely on his massive hinder legs, even as Conan had predicted. The sight sent panic racing through her. As he reared, the beast seemed more gigantic than ever; his snouted head towered among the trees. Then Conan's iron hand closed on her wrist and she was jerked headlong into the blinding welter of the leaves, and out again into the hot sunshine above, just as the monster fell forward with his front feet on the crag with an impact that made the rock vibrate. Behind the fugitives the huge head crashed through the twigs, and they looked down for a horrifying instant at the nightmare visage framed among the green leaves, eyes flaming, jaws gaping. Then the giant tusks clashed together futilely, and after that the head was withdrawn, vanishing from their sight as if it had sunk in a pool. Peering down through broken branches that scraped the rock, they saw it squatting on its haunches at the foot of the crag, staring unblinkingly up at them. Valeria shuddered. 'How long do you suppose he'll crouch there?' Conan kicked the skull on the leaf-strewn shelf. 'That fellow must have climbed up here to escape him, or one like him. He must have died of starvation. There are no bones broken. That thing must be a dragon, such as the black people speak of in their legends. If so, it won't leave here until we're both dead.' Valeria looked at him blankly, her resentment forgotten. She fought down a surging of panic. She had proved her reckless courage a thousand times in wild battles on sea and land, on the blood-slippery decks of burning war-ships, in the storming of walled cities, and on the trampled sandy beaches where the desperate men of the Red Brotherhood bathed their knives in one another's blood in their fights for leadership. But the prospect now confronting her congealed her blood. A cutlass stroke in the heat of battle was nothing; but to sit idle and helpless on a bare rock until she perished of starvation, besieged by a monstrous survival of an elder age - the thought sent panic throbbing through her brain. 'He must leave to eat and drink,' she said helplessly. 'He won't have to go far to do either,' Conan pointed out. 'He's just gorged on horsemeat, and like a real snake, he can go for a long time without eating or drinking again. But he doesn't sleep after eating, like a real snake, it seems. Anyway, he can't climb this crag.' Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person. 'Can't we get into the trees and get away, traveling like apes through the branches?' she asked desperately. He shook his head. 'I thought of that. The branches that touch the crag down there are too light. They'd break with our weight. Besides, I have an idea that devil could tear up any tree around here by its roots.' 'Well, are we going to sit here on our rumps until we starve, like that?' she cried furiously, kicking the skull clattering across the ledge. 'I won't do it! I'll go down there and cut his damned head off?' Conan had seated himself on a rocky projection at the foot of the spire. He looked up with a glint of admiration at her blazing eyes and tense, quivering figure, but, realizing that she was in just the mood for any madness, he let none of his admiration sound in his voice. 'Sit down,' he grunted, catching her by her wrist and pulling her down on his knee. She was too surprised to resist as he took her sword from her hand and shoved it back in its sheath. 'Sit still and calm down. You'd only break your

steel on his scales. He'd gobble you up in one gulp, or smash you like an egg with that spiked tail of his. We'll get out of his jam some way, but we shan't do it by getting chewed up and swallowed.'___She made no reply, nor did she seek to repulse his arm from about her waist. She was frightened, and the sensation was new to Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. So she sat on her companion's - or captor's - knee with a docility that would have amazed Zarallo, who had anathematized her as a she-devil out of hell's seraglio.___Conan played idly with her curly yellow locks, seemingly intent only upon his conquest. Neither the skeleton at his feet nor the monster crouching below disturbed his mind or dulled the edge of his interest.___The girl's restless eyes, roving the leaves below them, discovered splashes of color among the green. It was fruit, large, darkly crimson globes suspended from the boughs of a tree whose broad leaves were a peculiarly rich and vivid green. She became aware of both thirst and hunger, though thirst had not assailed her until she knew she could not descend from the crag to find food and water.___'We need not starve,' she said. 'There is fruit we can reach.'___Conan glanced where she pointed.___'If we ate that we wouldn't need the bite of a dragon,' he grunted. 'That's what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of the juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you'd be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag.'___'Oh!'___She lapsed into dismayed silence. There seemed no way out of their predicament, she reflected gloomily. She saw no way of escape, and Conan seemed to be concerned only with her supple waist and curly tresses. If he was trying to formulate a plan of escape he did not show it.___'If you'll take your hands off me long enough to climb up on that peak,' she said presently, 'you'll see something that will surprise you.'___He cast her a questioning glance, then obeyed with a shrug of his massive shoulders. Clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, he stared out over the forest roof.___He stood a long moment in silence, posed like a bronze statue on the rock.___'It's a walled city, right enough,' he muttered presently. 'Was that where you were going, when you tried to send me off alone to the coast?'___'I saw it before you came. I knew nothing of it when I left Sukhmet.'___'Who'd have thought to find a city here? I don't believe the Stygians ever penetrated this far. Could black people build a city like that? I see no herds on the plain, no signs of cultivation, or people moving about.'___'How could you hope to see all that, at this distance?' she demanded.___He shrugged his shoulders and dropped down on the shelf.___'Well, the folk of the city can't help us just now. And they might not, if they could. The people of the Black Countries are generally hostile to strangers. Probably stick us full of spears?'___He stopped short and stood silent, as if he had forgotten what he was saying, frowning down at the crimson spheres gleaming among the leaves.___'Spears!' he muttered. 'What a blasted fool I am not to have thought of that before! That shows what a pretty woman does to a man's mind.'___'What are you talking about?' she inquired.___Without answering her question, he descended to the belt of leaves and looked down through them. The great brute squatted below, watching the crag with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his breed have glared up at their troglodyte ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages. Conan cursed him without heat, and began cutting branches, reaching out and severing them as far from the end as he could reach. The agitation of the leaves made the monster restless. He rose from his haunches and lashed his hideous tail, snapping off saplings as if they had been toothpicks. Conan watched him warily from the corner of his eye, and just as

Valeria believed the dragon was about to hurl himself up the crag again, the Cimmerian drew back and climbed up to the ledge with the branches he had cut. There were three of these, slender shafts about seven feet long, but not larger than his thumb. He had also cut several strands of tough, thin vine.____'Branches too light for spear-hafts, and creepers no thicker than cords,' he remarked, indicating the foliage about the crag. 'It won't hold our weight - but there's strength in union. That's what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country. But we always fight by clans and tribes.'____'What the devil has that got to do with those sticks?' she demanded.____'You wait and see.'____Gathering the sticks in a compact bundle, he wedged his poniard hilt between them at one end. Then with the vines he bound them together, and when he had completed his task, he had a spear of no small strength, with a sturdy shaft seven feet in length.____'What good will that do?' she demanded. 'You told me that a blade couldn't pierce his scales?'____'He hasn't got scales all over him,' answered Conan. 'There's more than one way of skinning a panther.'____Moving down to the edge of the leaves, he reached the spear up and carefully thrust the blade through one of the Apples of Derketa, drawing aside to avoid the darkly purple drops that dripped from the pierced fruit. Presently he withdrew the blade and showed her the blue steel stained with a dull purplish crimson.____'I don't know whether it will do the job or not,' quoth he. 'There's enough poison there to kill an elephant, but - well, we'll see.'____Valeria was close behind him as he let himself down among the leaves. Cautiously holding the poisoned pike away from him, he thrust his head through the branches and addressed the monster.____'What are you waiting down there for, you misbegotten offspring of questionable parents?' was one of his more printable queries. 'Stick your ugly head up here again, you long-necked brute - or do you want me to come down there and kick you loose from your illegitimate spine?'____There was more of it - some of it couched in eloquence that made Valeria stare, in spite of her profane education among the seafarers. And it had its effect on the monster. Just as the incessant yapping of a dog worries and enrages more constitutionally silent animals, so the clamorous voice of a man rouses fear in some bestial bosoms and insane rage in others. Suddenly and with appalling quickness, the mastodonic brute reared up on its mighty hind legs and elongated its neck and body in a furious effort to reach this vociferous pigmy whose clamor was disturbing the primeval silence of its ancient realm.____But Conan had judged his distance with precision. Some five feet below him the mighty head crashed terribly but futilely through the leaves. And as the monstrous mouth gaped like that of a great snake, Conan drove his spear into the red angle of the jawbone hinge. He struck downward with all the strength of both arms, driving the long poniard blade to the hilt in flesh, sinew and bone.____Instantly the jaws clashed convulsively together, severing the triple-pieced shaft and almost precipitating Conan from his perch. He would have fallen but for the girl behind him, who caught his sword-belt in a desperate grasp. He clutched at a rocky projection, and grinned his thanks back to her.____Down on the ground the monster was wallowing like a dog with pepper in its eyes. He shook his head from side to side, pawed at it, and opened his mouth repeatedly to its widest extent. Presently he got a huge front foot on the stump of the shaft and managed to tear the blade out. Then he threw up his head, jaws wide and spouting blood, and glared up at the crag with such concentrated and intelligent fury that Valeria trembled and drew her

sword. The scales along his back and flanks turned from rusty brown to a dull lurid red. Most horribly the monster's silence was broken. The sounds that issued from his blood-streaming jaws did not sound like anything that could have been produced by an earthly creation. ___With harsh, grating roars, the dragon hurled himself at the crag that was the citadel of his enemies. Again and again his mighty head crashed upward through the branches, snapping vainly on empty air. He hurled his full ponderous weight against the rock until it vibrated from base to crest. And rearing upright he gripped it with his front legs like a man and tried to tear it up by the roots, as if it had been a tree. ___This exhibition of primordial fury chilled the blood in Valeria's veins, but Conan was too close to the primitive himself to feel anything but a comprehending interest. To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself and other men, and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity. ___He sat watching it tranquilly, and pointed out the various changes that were taking place in its voice and actions. ___'The poison's taking hold,' he said with conviction. ___'I don't believe it.' To Valeria it seemed preposterous to suppose that anything, however lethal, could have any effect on that mountain of muscle and fury. ___'There's pain in his voice,' declared Conan. 'First he was merely angry because of the stinging in his jaw. Now he feels the bite of the poison. Look! He's staggering. He'll be blind in a few more minutes. What did I tell you?' ___For suddenly the dragon had lurched about and went crashing off through the bushes. ___'Is he running away?' inquired Valeria uneasily. ___'He's making for the pool!' Conan sprang up, galvanized into swift activity. 'The poison makes him thirsty. Come on! He'll be blind in a few moments, but he can smell his way back to the foot of the crag, and if our scent's here still, he'll sit there until he dies. And others of his kind may come at his cries. Let's go!' ___'Down there?' Valeria was aghast. ___'Sure! We'll make for the city! They may cut our heads off there, but it's our only chance. We may run into a thousand more dragons on the way, but it's sure death to stay here. If we wait until he dies, we may have a dozen more to deal with. After me, in a hurry!' ___He went down the ramp as swiftly as an ape, pausing only to aid his less agile companion, who, until she saw the Cimmerian climb, had fancied herself the equal of any man in the rigging of a ship or on the sheer face of a cliff. ___They descended into the gloom below the branches and slid to the ground silently, though Valeria felt as if the pounding of her heart must surely be heard from far away. A noisy gurgling and lapping beyond the dense thicket indicated that the dragon was drinking at the pool. ___'As soon as his belly is full he'll be back,' muttered Conan. 'It may take hours for the poison to kill him - if it does at all.' ___Somewhere beyond the forest the sun was sinking to the horizon. The forest was a misty twilight place of black shadows and dim vistas. Conan gripped Valeria's wrist and glided away from the foot of the crag. He made less noise than a breeze blowing among the tree-trunks, but Valeria felt as if her soft boots were betraying their flight to all the forest. ___'I don't think he can follow a trail,' muttered Conan. 'But if a wind blew our body-scent to him, he could smell us out.' ___'Mitra grant that the wind

blow not!' Valeria breathed. ___Her face was a pallid oval in the gloom. She gripped her sword in her free hand, but the feel of the shagreen-bound hilt inspired only a feeling of helplessness in her. ___They were still some distance from the edge of the forest when they heard a snapping and crashing behind them. Valeria bit her lip to check a cry. ___'He's on our trail!' she whispered fiercely. ___Conan shook his head. ___'He didn't smell us at the rock, and he's blundering about through the forest trying to pick up our scent. Come on! It's the city or nothing now! He could tear down any tree we'd climb. If only the wind stays down? ___They stole on until the trees began to thin out ahead of them. Behind them the forest was a black impenetrable ocean of shadows. The ominous crackling still sounded behind them, as the dragon blundered in his erratic course. ___'There's the plain ahead,' breathed Valeria. 'A little more and we'll?' ___'Crom!' swore Conan. ___'Mitra!' whispered Valeria. ___Out of the south a wind had sprung up. ___It blew over them directly into the black forest behind them. Instantly a horrible roar shook the woods. The aimless snapping and crackling of the bushes changed to a sustained crashing as the dragon came like a hurricane straight toward the spot from which the scent of his enemies was wafted. ___'Run!' snarled Conan, his eyes blazing like those of a trapped wolf. 'It's all we can do!' ___Sailors' boots are not made for sprinting, and the life of a pirate does not train one for a runner. Within a hundred yards Valeria was panting and reeling in her gait, and behind them the crashing gave way to a rolling thunder as the monster broke out of the thickets and into the more open ground. ___Conan's iron arm about the woman's waist half lifted her; her feet scarcely touched the earth as she was borne along at a speed she could never have attained herself. If he could keep out of the beast's way for a bit, perhaps that betraying wind would shift - but the wind held, and a quick glance over his shoulder showed Conan that the monster was almost upon them, coming like a war-galley in front of a hurricane. He thrust Valeria from him with a force that sent her reeling a dozen feet to fall in a crumpled heap at the foot of the nearest tree, and the Cimmerian wheeled in the path of the thundering titan. ___Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct, and hurled himself full at the awful face that was bearing down on him. He leaped, slashing like a wildcat, felt his sword cut deep into the scales that sheathed the mighty snout - and then a terrific impact knocked him rolling and tumbling for fifty feet with all the wind and half the life battered out of him. ___How the stunned Cimmerian regained his feet, not even he could have ever told. But the only thought that filled his brain was of the woman lying dazed and helpless almost in the path of the hurtling fiend, and before the breath came whistling back into his gullet he was standing over her with his sword in his hand. ___She lay where he had thrown her, but she was struggling to a sitting posture. Neither tearing tusks nor trampling feet had touched her. It had been a shoulder or front leg that struck Conan, and the blind monster rushed on, forgetting the victims whose scent it had been following, in the sudden agony of its death throes. Headlong OB its course it thundered until its low-hung head crashed into a gigantic tree in its path. The impact tore the tree up by the roots and must have dashed the brains from the misshapen skull. Tree and monster fell together, and the dazed humans saw the branches and leaves shaken by the convulsions of the creature they covered - and then grow quiet. ___Conan lifted Valeria to her feet and together they started away at a reeling run. A few moments later they emerged into the still twilight of the treeless plain. ___Conan paused an instant and glanced

back at the ebon fastness behind them. Not a leaf stirred, nor a bird chirped. It stood as silent as it must have stood before Man was created.____'Come on,' muttered Conan, taking his companion's hand. 'It's touch and go now. If more dragons come out of the woods after us?'____He did not have to finish the sentence.____The city looked very far away across the plain, farther than it had looked from the crag. Valeria's heart hammered until she felt as if it would strangle her. At every step she expected to hear the crashing of the bushes and see another colossal nightmare bearing down upon them. But nothing disturbed the silence of the thickets.____With the first mile between them and the woods, Valeria breathed more easily. Her buoyant self-confidence began to thaw out again. The sun had set and darkness was gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that made stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths.____'No cattle, no plowed fields,' muttered Conan. 'How do these people live?'____'Perhaps the cattle are in pens for the night,' suggested Valeria, 'and the fields and grazing pastures are on the other side of the city.'____'Maybe,' he grunted. 'I didn't see any from the crag, though.'____The moon came up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivered. Black against the moon the strange city had a somber, sinister look.____Perhaps something of the same feeling occurred to Conan, for he stopped, glanced about him, and grunted: 'We stop here, No use coming to their gates in the night. They probably wouldn't let us in. Besides, we need rest, and we don't know how they'll receive us. A few hours' sleep will put us in better shape to fight or run.'____He led the way to a bed of cactus which grew in a circle - a phenomenon common to the southern desert. With his sword he chopped an opening, and motioned Valeria to enter.____'We'll be safe from snakes here, anyhow.'____She glanced fearfully back toward the black line that indicated the forest some six miles away.____'Suppose a dragon comes out of the woods?'____'We'll keep watch,' he answered, though he made no suggestion as to what they would do in such an event. He was staring at the city, a few miles away. Not a light shone from spire or tower. A great black mass of mystery, it reared cryptically against the moonlit sky.____'Lie down and sleep. I'll keep the first watch.'____She hesitated, glancing at him uncertainly, but he sat down cross-legged in the opening, facing toward the plain, his sword across his knees, his back to her. Without further comment she lay down on die sand inside the spiky circle.____'Wake me when the moon is at its zenith,' she directed.____He did not reply nor look toward her. Her last impression, as she sank into slumber, was of his muscular figure, immobile as a statue hewn out of bronze, outlined against the low-hanging stars._____2 By the Blaze of the Fire Jewels_____Valeria awoke with a start, to the realization that a gray dawn was stealing over the plain.____She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Conan squatted beside the cactus, cutting off the thick pears and dexterously twitching out the spikes.____'You didn't awake me,' she accused. 'You let me sleep all night!'____'You were tired,' he answered. 'Your posterior must have been sore, too, after that long ride. You pirates aren't used to horseback.'____'What about yourself?' she retorted.____'I was a kozak before I was a pirate,' he answered. 'They live in the saddle. I snatch naps like a panther watching beside the trail for a deer to come by. My ears keep watch while my eyes sleep.'____And indeed the giant barbarian seemed as much refreshed as if he had slept the whole night on a golden bed. Having removed the thorns, and peeled off the tough skin, he handed the girl a thick, juicy cactus leaf.____'Skin your teeth in that pear. It's food and drink to a desert man. I was a chief of the Zuagirs

once - desert men who live by plundering the caravans.'___'Is there anything you haven't been?' inquired the girl, half in derision and half in fascination.___'I've never been king of an Hyborian kingdom,' he grinned, taking an enormous mouthful of cactus. 'But I've dreamed of being even that. I may be too, some day. Why shouldn't I?''___She shook her head in wonder at his calm audacity, and fell to devouring her pear. She found it not unpleasing to the palate, and full of cool and thirst-satisfying juice. Finishing his meal, Conan wiped his hands in the sand, rose, ran his fingers through his thick black mane, hitched at his sword-belt and said:___'Well, let's go. If the people in that city are going to cut our throats they may as well do it now, before the heat of the day begins.'___His grim humor was unconscious, but Valeria reflected that it might be prophetic. She too hitched her sword belt as she rose. Her terrors of the night were past. The roaring dragons of the distant forest were like a dim dream. There was a swagger in her stride as she moved off beside the Cimmerian. Whatever perils lay ahead of them, their foes would be men. And Valeria of the Red Brotherhood had never seen the face of the man she feared.___Conan glanced down at her as she strode along beside him with her swinging stride that matched his own.___'You walk more like a hillman than a sailor,' he said. 'You must be an Aquilonian. The suns of Darfar never burnt your white skin brown. Many a princess would envy you.'___'I am from Aquilonia,' she replied. His compliments no longer irritated her. His evident admiration pleased her. For another man to have kept her watch while she slept would have angered her; she had always fiercely resented any man's attempting to shield or protect her because of her sex. But she found a secret pleasure in the fact that this man had done so. And he had not taken advantage of her fright and the weakness resulting from it. After all, she reflected, her companion was no common man.___The sun rose behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.___'Black last night against the moon,' grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. 'Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city.'___But they went on, and as they went Conan pointed out the fact that no road ran to the city from the north.___'No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city,' said he. 'No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated.'___Valeria saw the ancient irrigation ditches he indicated, half filled in places, and overgrown with cactus. She frowned with perplexity as her eyes swept over the plain that stretched on all sides of the city to the forest edge, which marched in a vast, dim ring. Vision did not extend beyond that ring.___She looked uneasily at the city. No helmets or spear-heads gleamed on battlements, no trumpets sounded, no challenge rang from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest brooded over the walls and minarets.___The sun was high above the eastern horizon when they stood before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecked the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glistened thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.___'It hasn't been opened for years!' exclaimed Valeria.___'A dead city,' grunted Conan. 'That's why the ditches were broken and the plain untouched.'___'But who built it? Who dwelt here? Where did they go? Why did they abandon it?''___'Who can say? Maybe an exiled clan of Stygians built it. Maybe not. It doesn't look like Stygian architecture. Maybe the people were wiped out by enemies, or a plague exterminated them.'___'In that case their treasures may still be gathering dust and cobwebs in there,' suggested Valeria, the acquisitive instincts of her

profession waking in her; prodded, too, by feminine curiosity. 'Can we open the gate? Let's go in and explore a bit.'___Conan eyed the heavy portal dubiously, but placed his massive shoulder against it and thrust with all the power of his muscular calves and thighs. With a rasping screech of rusty hinges the gate moved ponderously inward, and Conan straightened and drew his sword. Valeria stared over his shoulder, and made a sound indicative of surprise.___They were not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.___'Jade, or I'm a Shemite!' swore Conan.___'Not in such quantity!' protested Valeria.___'I've looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I'm talking about,' he asserted. 'That's jade! '___The vaulted ceiling was of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleamed with a poisonous radiance.___'Green fire-stones,' growled Conan. 'That's what the people of Punt call them. They're supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat's eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination. Let's look around. We might find a cache of jewels.'___'Shut the door,' advised Valeria. 'I'd hate to have to outrun a dragon down this hall.'___Conan grinned, and replied: 'I don't believe the dragons ever leave the forest.'___But he complied, and pointed out the broken bolt on the inner side.___'I thought I heard something snap when I shoved against it. That bolt's freshly broken. Rust has eaten nearly through it. If the people ran away, why should it have been bolted on the inside?'___'They undoubtedly left by another door,' suggested Valeria.___She wondered how many centuries had passed since the light of outer day had filtered into that great hall through the open door. Sunlight was finding its way somehow into the hall, and they quickly saw the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights were set in slot-like openings - translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels winked like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath their feet the dully lurid floor smoldered with changing hues and colors of flame. It was like treading the floors of hell with evil stars blinking overhead.___Three balustraded galleries ran along on each side of the hall, one above the other.___'A four-storied house,' grunted Conan, 'and this hall extends to the roof. It's long as a street. I seem to see a door at the other end.'___Valeria shrugged her white shoulders.___'Your eyes are better than mine, then, though I'm accounted sharp-eyed among the sea-rovers.'___They turned into an open door at random, and traversed a series of empty chambers, floored like the hall, and with walls of the same green jade, or of marble or ivory or chalcedony, adorned with friezes of bronze, gold or silver. In the ceilings the green fire-gems were set, and their light was as ghostly and illusive as Conan had predicted. Under the witch-fire glow the intruders moved like specters.___Some of the chambers lacked this illumination, and their doorways showed black as the mouth of the Pit. These Conan and Valeria avoided, keeping always to the lighted chambers.___Cobwebs hung in the corners, but there was no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade or carnelian which occupied the chambers. Here and there were rugs of that silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere did they find any

windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opened into another chamber or hall.____'Why don't we come to a street?' grumbled Valeria. 'This place or whatever we're in must be as big as the king of Turan's seraglio.'____'They must not have perished of plague,' said Conan, meditating upon the mystery of the empty city. 'Otherwise we'd find skeletons. Maybe it became haunted, and everybody got up and left. Maybe?'____'Maybe, hell!' broke in Valeria rudely. 'We'll never know. Look at these friezes. They portray men. What race do they belong to?'____Conan scanned them and shook his head.____'I never saw people exactly like them. But there's the smack of the East about them - Vendhya, maybe, or Kosala.'____'Were you a king in Kosala?' she asked, masking her keen curiosity with derision.____'No. But I was a war-chief of the Afghulis who live in the Himelian mountains above the borders of Vendhya. These people favor the Kosalans. But why should Kosalans be building a city this far to west?'____The figures portrayed were those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wore filmy robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and were depicted mostly in attitudes of feasting, dancing or love-making.____'Easterners, all right,' grunted Conan, 'but from where I don't know. They must have lived a disgustingly peaceful life, though, or they'd have scenes of wars and fights. Let's go up that stair.'____It was an ivory spiral that wound up from the chamber in which they were standing. They mounted three flights and came into a broad chamber on the fourth floor, which seemed to be the highest tier in the building. Skylights in the ceiling illuminated the room, in which light the fire-gems winked pallidly. Glancing through the doors they saw, except on one side, a series of similarly lighted chambers. This other door opened upon a balustraded gallery that overhung a hall much smaller than the one they had recently explored on the lower floor.____'Hell!' Valeria sat down disgustedly on a jade bench. 'The people who deserted this city must have taken all their treasures with them. I'm tired of wandering through these bare rooms at random.'____'All these upper chambers seem to be lighted,' said Conan. 'I wish we could find a window that overlooked the city. Let's have a look through that door over there.'____'You have a look,' advised Valeria. 'I'm going to sit here and rest my feet.'____Conan disappeared through the door opposite that one opening upon the gallery, and Valeria leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head, and thrust her booted legs out in front of her. These silent rooms and halls with their gleaming green clusters of ornaments and burning crimson floors were beginning to depress her. She wished they could find their way out of the maze into which they had wandered and emerge into a street. She wondered idly what furtive, dark feet had glided over those flaming floors in past centuries, how many deeds of cruelty and mystery those winking ceiling-gems had blazed down upon.____It was a faint noise that brought her out of her reflections. She was on her feet with her sword in her hand before she realized what had disturbed her. Conan had not returned, and she knew it was not he that she had heard.____The sound had come from somewhere beyond the door that opened on to the gallery. Soundlessly in her soft leather boots she glided through it, crept across the balcony and peered down between the heavy balustrades.____A man was stealing along the hall.____The sight of a human being in this supposedly deserted city was a startling shock. Crouching down behind the stone balusters, with every nerve tingling, Valeria glared down at the stealthy figure.____The man in no way resembled the figures depicted on the friezes. He was slightly above middle height, very dark, though not negroid. He was naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly

covered his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hung in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He was gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stood out on his arms and legs, without that fleshy padding that presents a pleasing symmetry of contour. He was built with an economy that was almost repellent. Yet it was not so much his physical appearance as his attitude that impressed the woman who watched him. He slunk along, stooped in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasped a wide-tipped blade in his right hand, and she saw it shake with the intensity of the emotion that gripped him. He was afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turned his head she caught the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair. He did not see her. On tiptoe he glided across the hall and vanished through an open door. A moment later she heard a choking cry, and then silence fell again. Consumed with curiosity, Valeria glided along the gallery until she came to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opened into another, smaller gallery that encircled a large chamber. This chamber was on the third floor, and its ceiling was not so high as that of the hall. It was lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow left the spaces under the balcony in shadows. Valeria's eyes widened. The man she had seen was still in the chamber. He lay face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body was limp, his arms spread wide. His curved sword lay near him. She wondered why he should lie there so motionless. Then her eyes narrowed as she stared down at the rug on which he lay. Beneath and about him the fabric showed a slightly different color, a deeper, brighter crimson. Shivering slightly, she crouched down closer behind the balustrade, intently scanning the shadows under the overhanging gallery. They gave up no secret. Suddenly another figure entered the grim drama. He was a man similar to the first, and he came in by a door opposite that which gave upon the hall. His eyes glared at the sight of the man on the floor, and he spoke something in a staccato voice that sounded like 'Chic-mec!' The other did not move. The man stepped quickly across the floor, bent, gripped the fallen man's shoulder and turned him over. A choking cry escaped him as the head fell back limply, disclosing a throat that had been severed from ear to ear. The man let the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and sprang to his feet, shaking like a wind-blown leaf. His face was an ashy mask of fear. But with one knee flexed for flight, he froze suddenly, became as immobile as an image, staring across the chamber with dilated eyes. In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light began to glow and grow, a light that was not part of the fire-stone gleam. Valeria felt her hair stir as she watched it; for, dimly visible in the throbbing radiance, there floated a human skull, and it was from this skull - human yet appallingly misshapen - that the spectral light seemed to emanate. It hung there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night and the shadows, growing more and more distinct; human, and yet not human as she knew humanity. The man stood motionless, an embodiment of paralysed horror, staring fixedly at the apparition. The thing moved out from the wall and a grotesque shadow moved with it. Slowly the shadow became visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shone whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grinned eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seemed unable to take his eyes from it. He stood still, his sword dangling from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist. Valeria

realized that it was not fear alone that paralysed him. Some hellish quality of that throbbing glow had robbed him of his power to think and act. She herself, safely above the scene, felt the subtle impact of a nameless emanation that was a threat to sanity.____The horror swept toward its victim and he moved at last, but only to drop his sword and sink to his knees, covering his eyes with his hands. Dumbly he awaited the stroke of the blade that now gleamed in the apparition's hand as it reared above him like Death triumphant over mankind.____Valeria acted according to the first impulse of her wayward nature. With one tigerish movement she was over the balustrade and dropping to the floor behind the awful shape. It wheeled at the thud of her soft boots on the floor, but even as it turned, her keen blade lashed down, and a fierce exultation swept her as she felt the edge cleave solid flesh and mortal bone.____The apparition cried out gurglingly and went down, severed through shoulder, breast-bone and spine, and as it fell the burning skull rolled clear, revealing a lank mop of black hair and a dark face twisted in the convulsions of death. Beneath the horrific masquerade there was a human being, a man similar to the one kneeling supinely on the floor.____The latter looked up at the sound of the blow and the cry, and now he glared in wild-eyed amazement at the white-skinned woman who stood over the corpse with a dripping sword in her hand.____He staggered up, yammering as if the sight had almost unseated his reason. She was amazed to realize that she understood him. He was gibbering in the Stygian tongue, though in a dialect unfamiliar to her.____'Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?' Then rushing on, without waiting for her to reply: 'But you are a friend - goddess or devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon they conjured up out of the catacombs! Listen!'____He stopped short in his ravings and stiffened, straining his ears with painful intensity. The girl heard nothing.____'We must hasten!' he whispered. 'They are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!'____He seized her wrist in a convulsive grasp she found hard to break.____'Whom do you mean by "they"?' she demanded.____He stared at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, as if he found her ignorance hard to understand.____'They?' he stammered vaguely. 'Why - why, the people of Xotalanc! The clan of the man you slew. They who dwell by the eastern gate.'____'You mean to say this city is inhabited?' she exclaimed.____'Aye! Aye!' He was writhing in the impatience of apprehension. 'Come away! Come quick! We must return to Tecuhltli!'____'Where is that?' she demanded.____'The quarter by the western gate!' He had her wrist again and was pulling her toward the door through which he had first come. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his dark forehead, and his eyes blazed with terror.____'Wait a minute!' she growled, flinging off his hand. 'Keep your hands off me, or I'll split your skull. What's all this about? Who are you? Where would you take me?'____He took a firm grip on himself, casting glances to all sides, and began speaking so fast his words tripped over each other.____'My name is Techotl. I am of Techuhltli. I and this man who lies with his throat cut came into the Halls of Silence to try and ambush some of the Xotalancas. But we became separated and I returned here to find him with his gullet slit. The Burning Skull did it, I know, just as he would have slain me had you not killed him. But perhaps he was not alone. Others may be stealing from Xotalanc! The gods themselves blench at the fate of those they take alive!'____At the thought he shook as with an ague and his dark skin grew ashy. Valeria frowned puzzledly at him. She sensed

intelligence behind this rigmarole, but it was meaningless to her.____She turned toward the skull, which still glowed and pulsed on the floor, and was reaching a booted toe tentatively toward it, when the man who called himself Techotl sprang forward with aery.____'Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc understand its secret - they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction.'____She scowled at him uncertainly. He was not a reassuring figure, with his lean, muscle-knotted frame, and snaky locks. In his eyes, behind the glow of terror, lurked a weird light she had never seen in the eyes of a man wholly sane. Yet he seemed sincere in his protestations.____'Come!' he begged, reaching for her hand, and then recoiling as he remembered her warning. 'You are a stranger. How you came here I do not know, but if you were a goddess or a demon, come to aid Tecuhltli, you would know all the things you have asked me. You must be from beyond the great forest, whence our ancestors came. But you are our friend, or you would not have slain my enemy. Come quickly, before the Xotalancas find us and slay us!'____From his repellent, impassioned face she glanced to the sinister skull, smoldering and glowing on the floor near the dead man. It was like a skull seen in a dream, undeniably human, yet with disturbing distortions and malformations of contour and outline. In life the wearer of that skull must have presented an alien and monstrous aspect. Life? It seemed to possess some sort of life of its own. Its jaws yawned at her and snapped together. Its radiance grew brighter, more vivid, yet the impression of nightmare grew too; it was a dream; all life was a dream - it was Techotl's urgent voice which snapped Valeria back from the dim gulfs whither she was drifting.____'Do not look at the skull! Do not look at the skull!' It was a far cry across unreckoned voids.____Valeria shook herself like a lion shaking his mane. Her vision cleared. Techotl was chattering: 'In life it housed the awful brain of a king of magicians! It holds still the life and fire of magic drawn from outer spaces!'____With a curse Valeria leaped, lithe as a panther, and the skull crashed to flaming bits under her swinging sword. Somewhere in the room, or in the void, or in the dim reaches of her consciousness, an inhuman voice cried out in pain and rage.____Techotl's hand was plucking at her arm and he was gibbering: 'You have broken it! You have destroyed it! Not all the black arts of Xotalanc can rebuild it! Come away! Come away quickly, now!'____'But I can't go,' she protested. 'I have a friend somewhere near by?'____The flare of his eyes cut her short as he stared past her with an expression grown ghastly. She wheeled just as four men rushed through as many doors, converging on the pair in the center of the chamber.____They were like the others she had seen, the same knotted muscles bulging on otherwise gaunt limbs, the same lank blue-black hair, the same mad glare in their wide eyes. They were armed and clad like Techotl, but on the breast of each was painted a white skull.____There were no challenges or war-cries. Like blood-mad tigers the men of Xotalanc sprang at the throats of their enemies. Techotl met them with the fury of desperation, ducked the swipe of a wide-headed blade, and grappled with the wielder, and bore him to the floor where they rolled and wrestled in murderous silence.____The other three swarmed on Valeria, their weird eyes red as the eyes of mad dogs.____She killed the first who came within reach before he could strike a blow, her long straight blade splitting his skull even as his own sword

lifted for a stroke. She side-stepped a thrust, even as she parried a slash. Her eyes danced and her lips smiled without mercy. Again she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, and the hum of her steel was like a bridal song in her ears. Her sword darted past a blade that sought to parry, and sheathed six inches of its point in a leather-guarded midriff. The man gasped agonizedly and went to his knees, but his tall mate lunged in, in ferocious silence, raining blow on blow so furiously that Valeria had no opportunity to counter. She stepped back coolly, parrying the strokes and watching for her chance to thrust home. He could not long keep up that flailing whirlwind. His arm would tire, his wind would fail; he would weaken, falter, and then her blade would slide smoothly into his heart. A sidelong glance showed her Techotl kneeling on the breast of his antagonist and striving to break the other's hold on his wrist and to drive home a dagger. Sweat beaded the forehead of the man facing her, and his eyes were like burning coals. Smite as he would, he could not break past nor beat down her guard. His breath came in gusty gulps, his blows began to fall erratically. She stepped back to draw him out - and felt her thighs locked in an iron grip. She had forgotten the wounded man on the floor. Crouching on his knees, he held her with both arms locked about her legs, and his mate croaked in triumph and began working his way around to come at her from the left side. Valeria wrenched and tore savagely, but in vain. She could free herself of this clinging menace with a downward flick of her sword, but in that instant the curved blade of the tall warrior would crash through her skull. The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast. She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his head back so that his white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph - and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat. 'Conan!' gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. 'Dog of hell!' Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room. 'What the devil's going on here?' Conan bestrode the corpse of the man he had killed, broadsword in hand, glaring about him in amazement. Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in the thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes. 'What is all this?' Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprise of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with these fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumfounded ears. 'Five dead dogs!' exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. 'Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!' He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the

Aquilonian tongue: 'Who is this madman?'___Valeria shrugged her shoulders.___'He says his name's Techotl. From his babblings I gather that his people live at one end of this crazy city, and these others at the other end. Maybe we'd better go with him. He seems friendly, and it's easy to see that the other clan isn't.'___Techotl had ceased his dancing and was listening again, his head tilted sidewise, dog-like, triumph struggling with fear in his repellent countenance.___'Come away, now!' he whispered. 'We have done enough! Five dead dogs! My people will welcome you! They will honor you! But come! It is far to Tecuhtli. At any moment the Xotalancs may come on us in numbers too great even for your swords.'___'Lead the way,' grunted Conan.___Techotl instantly mounted a stair leading up to the gallery, beckoning them to follow him, which they did, moving rapidly to keep on his heels. Having reached the gallery, he plunged into a door that opened toward the west, and hurried through chamber after chamber, each lighted by skylights or green fire-jewels.___'What sort of a place can this be?' muttered Valeria under her breath.___'Crom knows!' answered Conan. 'I've seen his kind before, though. They live on the shores of Lake Zuad, near the border of Kush. They're a sort of mongrel Stygians, mixed with another race that wandered into Stygia from the east some centuries ago and were absorbed by them. They're called Tlazitlans. I'm willing to bet it wasn't they who built this city, though.'___Techotl's fear did not seem to diminish as they drew away from the chamber where the dead men lay. He kept twisting his head on his shoulder to listen for sounds of pursuit, and stared with burning intensity into every doorway they passed.___Valeria shivered in spite of herself. She feared no man. But the weird floor beneath her feet, the uncanny jewels over her head, dividing the lurking shadows among them, the stealth and terror of their guide, impressed her with a nameless apprehension, a sensation of lurking, inhuman peril.___'They may be between us and Tecuhtli!' he whispered once. 'We must beware lest they be lying in wait!___'Why don't we get out of this infernal palace, and take to the streets?' demanded Valeria.___'There are no streets in Xuchotl,' he answered. 'No squares nor open courts. The whole city is built like one giant palace under one great roof. The nearest approach to a street is the Great Hall which traverses the city from the north gate to the south gate. The only doors opening into the outer world are the city gates, through which no living man has passed for fifty years.'___'How long have you dwelt here?' asked Conan.___'I was born in the castle of Tecuhtli thirty-five years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. For the love of the gods, let us go silently! These halls may be full of lurking devils. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhtli.'___So in silence they glided on with the green fire-stones blinking overhead and the naming floors smoldering under their feet, and it seemed to Valeria as if they fled through hell, guided by a dark-faced lank-haired goblin.___Yet it was Conan who halted them as they were crossing an unusually wide chamber. His wilderness-bred ears were keener even than the ears of Techotl whetted though these were by a lifetime of warfare in those silent corridors.___'You think some of your enemies may be ahead of us, lying in ambush?'___'They prowl through these rooms at all hours,' answered Techotl, 'as do we. The halls and chambers between Tecuhtli and Xotalanc are a disputed region, owned by no man. We call it the Halls of Silence. Why do you ask?'___'Because men are in the chambers ahead of us,' answered Conan. 'I heard steel clink against stone.'___Again a shaking seized Techotl, and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.___'Perhaps they are your friends,' suggested Valeria.___'We dare not chance it,' he

panted, and moved with frenzied activity. He turned aside and glided through a doorway on the left which led into a chamber from which an ivory staircase wound down into darkness.____'This leads to an unlighted corridor below us!' he hissed, great beads of perspiration standing out on his brow. 'They may be lurking there, too. It may all be a trick to draw us into it. But we must take the chance that they have laid their ambush in the rooms above. Come swiftly, now!'____Softly as phantoms they descended the stair and came to the mouth of a corridor black as night. They crouched there for a moment, listening, and then melted into it. As they moved along, Valeria's flesh crawled between her shoulders in momentary expectation of a sword-thrust in the dark. But for Conan's iron fingers gripping her arm she had no physical cognizance of her companions. Neither made as much noise as a cat would have made. The darkness was absolute. One hand, outstretched, touched a wall, and occasionally she felt a door under her fingers. The hallway seemed interminable.____Suddenly they were galvanized by a sound behind them. Valeria's flesh crawled anew, for she recognized it as the soft opening of a door. Men had come into the corridor behind them. Even with the thought she stumbled over something that felt like a human skull. It rolled across the floor with an appalling clatter.____'Run!' yelled Techotl, a note of hysteria in his voice, and was away down the corridor like a flying ghost.____Again Valeria felt Conan's hand bearing her up and sweeping her along as they raced after their guide. Conan could see in the dark no better than she, but he possessed a sort of instinct that made his course unerring. Without his support and guidance she would have fallen or stumbled against the wall. Down the corridor they sped, while the swift patter of flying feet drew closer and closer, and then suddenly Techotl panted: 'Here is the stair! After me, quick! Oh, quick!'____His hand came out of the dark and caught Valeria's wrist as she stumbled blindly on the steps. She felt herself half dragged, half lifted up the winding stair, while Conan released her and turned on the steps, his ears and instincts telling him their foes were hard at their backs. And the sounds were not all those of human feet.____Something came writhing up the steps, something that slithered and rustled and brought a chill in the air with it. Conan lashed down with his great sword and felt the blade shear through something that might have been flesh and bone, and cut deep into the stair beneath. Something touched his foot that chilled like the touch of frost, and then the darkness beneath him was disturbed by a frightful thrashing and lashing, and a man cried out in agony.____The next moment Conan was racing up the winding staircase, and through a door that stood open at the head.____Valeria and Techotl were already through, and Techotl slammed the door and shot a bolt across it - the first Conan had seen since they left the outer gate.____Then he turned and ran across the well-lighted chamber into which they had come, and as they passed through the farther door, Conan glanced back and saw the door groaning and straining under heavy pressure violently applied from the other side.____Though Techotl did not abate either his speed or his caution, he seemed more confident now. He had the air of a man who has come into familiar territory, within call of friends.____But Conan renewed his terror by asking: 'What was that thing that I fought on the stair?'____'The men of Xotalanc,' answered Techotl, without looking back. 'I told you the halls were full of them.'____'This wasn't a man,' grunted Conan. 'It was something that crawled, and it was as cold as ice to the touch. I think I cut it asunder. It fell back on the men who were following us, and must have killed one of them in its death throes.'____Techotl's head jerked back, his face ashy again.

Convulsively he quickened his pace.____'It was the Crawler! A monster they have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set's name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli!'____'I doubt it,' grunted Conan. 'That was a shrewd cut I dealt it on the stair.'____'Hasten! Hasten!' groaned Techotl.____They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door. Techotl said: 'This is Tecuhltli!'_____3 The People of the Feud_____Techotl smote on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turned sidewise, so that he could watch back along the hall.____'Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe,' he said.____'Why don't they open the door?' asked Conan.____'They are looking at us through the Eye,' answered Techotl. 'They are puzzled at the sight of you.' He lifted his voice and called: 'Open the door, Xecelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest! - They will open,' he assured his allies.____'They'd better do it in a hurry, then,' said Conan grimly. 'I hear something crawling along the floor beyond the wall.'____Techotl went ashy again and attacked the door with his fists, screaming: 'Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!'____Even as he beat and shouted, the great bronze door swung noiselessly back, revealing a heavy chain across the entrance, over which spearheads bristled and fierce countenances regarded them intently for an instant. Then the chain was dropped and Techotl grasped the arms of his friends in a nervous frenzy and fairly dragged them over the threshold. A glance over his shoulder just as the door was closing showed Conan the long dim vista of the hall, and dimly framed at the other end an ophidian shape that writhed slowly and painfully into view, flowing in a dull-hued length from a chamber door, its hideous blood-stained head wagging drunkenly. Then the closing door shut off the view.____Inside the square chamber into which they had come heavy bolts were drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door was made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stood on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there was a complicated contrivance of mirrors which Conan guessed was the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall could be looked through from within without being discernible from without. The four guardsmen stared at the strangers with wonder, but asked no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moved with easy confidence now, as if he had shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.____'Come!' he urged his new-found friends, but Conan glanced toward the door.____'What about those fellows who were following us? Won't they try to storm that door?'____Techotl shook his head.____'They know they cannot break down the Door of the Eagle. They will flee back to Xotalanc, with their crawling fiend. Come! I will take you to the rulers of Tecuhltli.'____One of the four guards opened the door opposite the one by which they had entered, and they passed through into a hallway which, like most of the rooms on that level, was lighted by both the slot-like skylights and the clusters of winking fire-gems. But unlike the other rooms they had traversed, this hall showed evidences of occupation. Velvet tapestries adorned the glossy jade walls, rich rugs were on the crimson floors and the ivory seats, benches and divans were littered with satin cushions.____The hall ended in an ornate door, before which stood no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushered his friends into a broad chamber, where some thirty

dark-skinned men and women lounging on satin-covered couches sprang up with exclamations of amazement.____The men, all except one, were of the same type as Techotl, and the women were equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wore sandals, golden breast-plates, and scanty silk shirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, were bound with silver circlets.____On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sat a man and a woman who differed subtly from the others. He was a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he was bearded, with a thick, blue-black beard which fell almost to his broad girdle. He wore a robe of purple silk which reflected changing sheens of color with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, revealed a forearm massive with corded muscles. The band which confined his blue-black locks was set with glittering jewels.____The woman beside him sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation as the strangers entered, and her eyes, passing over Conan, fixed themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She was tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She was clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wore merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which fell below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completed that part of her costume, which she wore with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples were adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She spoke no word after her first exclamation; she stood tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria.____The man on the ivory seat had not risen.____'Prince Olmec,' spoke Techotl, bowing low, with arms outspread and the palms of his hands turned upward, 'I bring allies from the world beyond the forest. In the Chamber of Tezcoti the Burning Skull slew Chicmec, my companion?'____'The Burning Skull!' It was a shuddering whisper of fear from the people of Tecuhltli.____'Aye! Then came I, and found Chicmec lying with his throat cut. Before I could flee, the Burning Skull came upon me, and when I looked upon it my blood became as ice and the marrow of my bones melted. I could neither fight nor run. I could only await the stroke. Then came this white-skinned woman and struck him down with her sword; and lo, it was only a dog of Xotalanc with white paint upon his skin and the living skull of an ancient wizard upon his head! Now that skull lies in many pieces, and the dog who wore it is a dead man!'____An indescribably fierce exultation edged the last sentence, and was echoed in the low, savage exclamations from the crowding listeners.____'But wait!' exclaimed Techotl. 'There is more! While I talked with the woman, four Xotalancs came upon us! One I slew -there is the stab in my thigh to prove how desperate was the fight. Two the woman killed. But we were hard pressed when this man came into the fray and split the skull of the fourth! Aye! Five crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!'____He pointed at a black column of ebony which stood behind the dais. Hundreds of red dots scarred its polished surface - the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.____'Five red nails for five Xotalanca lives!' exulted Techotl, and the horrible exultation in the faces of the listeners made them inhuman.____'Who are these people?' asked Olmec, and his voice was like the low, deep rumble of a distant bull. None of the people of Xuchotl spoke loudly. It was as if they had absorbed into their souls the silence of the empty halls and deserted chambers.____'I am Conan, a Cimmerian,' answered the barbarian briefly. 'This woman is Valeria of

the Red Brotherhood, an Aquilonian pirate. We are deserters from an army on the Darfar border, far to the north, and are trying to reach the coast.'___The woman on the dais spoke loudly, her words tripping in her haste.'___'You can never reach the coast! There is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!'___'What do you mean?' growled Conan, clapping his hand to his hilt and stepping about so as to face both the dais and the rest of the room. 'Are you telling us we're prisoners?'___'She did not mean that,' interposed Olmec. 'We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl.'___His eyes nickered to Valeria, and he lowered them quickly.'___'This woman is Tascela,' he said. 'She is a princess of Tecuhltli. But let food and drink be brought our guests. Doubtless they are hungry, and weary from their long travels.'___He indicated an ivory table, and after an exchange of glances, the adventurers seated themselves. The Cimmerian was suspicious. His fierce blue eyes roved about the chamber, and he kept his sword close to his hand. But an invitation to eat and drink never found him backward. His eyes kept wandering to Tascela, but the princess had eyes only for his white-skinned companion.'___Techotl, who had bound a strip of silk about his wounded thigh, placed himself at the table to attend to the wants of his friends, seeming to consider it a privilege and honor to see after their needs. He inspected the food and drink the others brought in gold vessels and dishes, and tasted each before he placed it before his guests. While they ate, Olmec sat in silence on his ivory seat, watching them from under his broad black brows. Tascela sat beside him, chin cupped in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. Her dark, enigmatic eyes, burning with a mysterious light, never left Valeria's supple figure. Behind her seat a sullen handsome girl waved an ostrich-plume fan with a slow rhythm.'___The food was fruit of an exotic kind unfamiliar to the wanderers, but very palatable, and the drink was a light crimson wine that carried a heady tang.'___'You have come from afar,' said Olmec at last. 'I have read the books of our fathers. Aquilonia lies beyond the lands of the Stygians and the Shemites, beyond Argos and Zingara; and Cimmeria lies beyond Aquilonia.'___'We have each a roving foot,' answered Conan carelessly.'___'How you won through the forest is a wonder to me,' quoth Olmec. 'In bygone days a thousand fighting-men scarcely were able to carve a road through it perils.'___'We encountered a bench-legged monstrosity about the size of a mastodon,' said Conan casually, holding out his wine goblet which Techotl filled with evident pleasure. 'But when we'd killed it we had no further trouble.'___The wine vessel slipped from Techotl's hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin went ashy. Olmec started to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breathed up from the others. Some slipped to their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only Tascela seemed not to have heard. Conan glared about him bewilderedly.'___'What's the matter? What are you gaping about?'___'You - you slew the dragon-god?'___'God? I killed a dragon. Why not? It was trying to gobble us up.'___'But dragons are immortal!' exclaimed Olmec. 'They slay each other, but no man ever killed a dragon! The thousand fighting-men of our ancestors who fought their way to Xuchotl could not prevail against them! Their swords broke like twigs against their scales!'___'If your ancestors had thought to dip their spears in the poisonous juice of Derketa's Apples,' quoth Conan, with his mouth full, 'and jab them in the eyes or mouth or somewhere like that, they'd have seen that dragons are not more immortal than any other chunk of beef. The carcass lies at the edge of

the trees, just within the forest. If you don't believe me, go and look for yourself.'___Olmec shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder.___'It was because of the dragons that our ancestors took refuge in Xuchotl,' said he. 'They dared not pass through the plain and plunge into the forest beyond. Scores of them were seized and devoured by the monsters before they could reach the city.'___'Then your ancestors didn't build Xuchotl?' asked Valeria.___'It was ancient when they first came into the land. How long it had stood here, not even its degenerate inhabitants knew.'___'Your people came from Lake Zuad?' questioned Conan.___'Aye. More than half a century ago a tribe of the Tlazitlans rebelled against the Stygian king, and, being defeated in battle, fled southward. For many weeks they wandered over grasslands, desert hills, and at last they came into the great forest, a thousand fighting-men with their women and children.___'It was in the forest that the dragons fell upon them, and tore many to pieces; so the people fled in a frenzy of fear before them, and at last came into the plain and saw the city of Xuchotl in the midst of it.___'They camped before the city, not daring to leave the plain, for the night was made hideous with the noise of the battling monsters throughout the forest. They made war incessantly upon one another. Yet they came not into the plain.___'The people of the city shut their gates and shot arrows at our people from the walls. The Tlazitlans were imprisoned on the plain, as if the ring of the forest had been a great wall; for to venture into the woods would have been madness.___'That night there came secretly to their camp a slave from the city, one of their own blood, who with a band of exploring soldiers had wandered into the forest long before, when he was a young man. The dragons had devoured all his companions, but he had been taken into the city to dwell in servitude. His name was Tolkemec.' A flame lighted the dark eyes at a mention of the name, and some of the people muttered obscenely and spat. 'He promised to open the gates to the warriors. He asked only that all captives taken be delivered into his hands.___'At dawn he opened the gates. The warriors swarmed in and the halls of Xuchotl ran red. Only a few hundred folk dwelt there, decaying remnants of a once great race. Tolkemec said they came from the east, long ago, from Old Kosala, when the ancestors of those who now dwell in Kosala came up from the south and drove forth the original inhabitants of the land. They wandered far westward and finally found this forest-girdled plain, inhabited then by a tribe of black people.___'These they enslaved and set to building a city. From the hills to the east they brought jade and marble and lapis lazuli, and gold, silver and copper. Herds of elephants provided them with ivory. When their city was completed, they slew all the black slaves. And their magicians made a terrible magic to guard the city; for by their necromantic arts they re-created the dragons which had once dwelt in this lost land, and whose monstrous bones they found in the forest. Those bones they clothed in flesh and life, and the living beasts walked the earth as they walked it when Time was young. But the wizards wove a spell that kept them in the forest and they came not into the plain.___'So for many centuries the people of Xuchotl dwelt in their city, cultivating the fertile plain, until their wise men learned how to grow fruit within the city - fruit which is not planted in soil, but obtains its nourishment out of the air - and then they let the irrigation ditches run dry, and dwelt more and more in luxurious sloth, until decay seized them. They were a dying race when our ancestors broke through the forest and came into the plain. Their wizards had died, and the people had forgot their ancient necromancy. They could fight neither by sorcery nor the sword.___'Well, our fathers slew the

people of Xuchotl, all except a hundred which were given living into the hands of Tolkemec, who had been their slave; and for many days and nights the halls re-echoed to their screams under the agony of his tortures.____'So the Tlazitlans dwelt here, for a while in peace, ruled by the brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. Tolkemec took a girl of the tribe to wife, and because he had opened the gates, and because he knew many of the arts of the Xuchot-lans, he shared the rule of the tribe with the brothers who had led the rebellion and the flight.____'For a few years, then, they dwelt at peace within the city, doing little but eating, drinking and making love, and raising children. There was no necessity to till the plain, for Tolkemec taught them how to cultivate the air-devouring fruits. Besides, the slaying of the Xuchotlans broke the spell that held the dragons in the forest, and they came nightly and bellowed about the gates of the city. The plain ran red with the blood of their eternal warfare, and it was then that?' He bit his tongue in the midst of the sentence, then presently continued, but Valeria and Conan felt that he had checked an admission he had considered unwise.____'Five years they dwelt in peace. Then' - Olmec's eyes rested briefly on the silent woman at his side - 'Xotalanc took a woman to wife, a woman whom both Tecuhltli and old Tolkemec desired. In his madness, Tecuhltli stole her from her husband. Aye, she went willingly enough. Tolkemec, to spite Xotalanc, aided Tecuhltli. Xotalanc demanded that she be given back to him, and the council of the tribe decided that the matter should be left to the woman. She chose to remain with Tecuhltli. In wrath Xotalanc sought to take her back by force, and the retainers of the brothers came to blows in the Great Hall.____'There was much bitterness. Blood was shed on both sides. The quarrel became a feud, the feud an open war. From the welter three factions emerged - Tecuhltli, Xotalanc, and Tolkemec. Already, in the days of peace, they had divided the city between them. Tecuhltli dwelt in the western quarter of the city, Xotalanc in the eastern, and Tolkemec with his family by the southern gate.____'Anger and resentment and jealousy blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back; for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity. Tecuhltli fought with Xotalanc, and Tolkemec aided first one and then the other, betraying each faction as it fitted his purpose. Tecuhltli and his people withdrew into the quarter of the western gate, where we now sit. Xuchotl is built in the shape of an oval. Tecuhltli, which took its name from its prince, occupies the western end of the oval. The people blocked up all doors connecting the quarter with the rest of the city, except one on each floor, which could be defended easily. They went into the pits below the city and built a wall cutting off the western end of the catacombs, where lie the bodies of the ancient Xuchotlans, and of those Tlazitlans slain in the feud. They dwelt as in a besieged castle, making sorties and forays on their enemies.____'The people of Xotalanc likewise fortified the eastern quarter of the city, and Tolkemec did likewise with the quarter by the southern gate. The central part of the city was left bare and uninhabited. Those empty halls and chambers became a battleground, and a region of brooding terror.____'Tolkemec warred on both clans. He was a fiend in the form of a human, worse than Xotalanc. He knew many secrets of the city he never told the others. From the crypts of the catacombs he plundered the dead of their grisly secrets - secrets of ancient kings and wizards, long forgotten by the degenerate Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. But all his magic did not aid him the night we of Tecuhltli stormed his castle and butchered all his people. Tolkemec we tortured for many days.'____His

voice sank to a caressing slur, and a faraway look grew in his eyes, as if he looked back over the years to a scene which caused him intense pleasure.____'Aye, we kept the life in him until he screamed for death as for a bride. At last we took him living from the torture chamber and cast him into a dungeon for the rats to gnaw as he died. From that dungeon, somehow, he managed to escape, and dragged himself into the catacombs. There without doubt he died, for the only way out of the catacombs beneath Tecuhltli is through Tecuhltli, and he never emerged by that way. His bones were never found, and the superstitious among our people swear that his ghost haunts the crypts to this day, wailing among the bones of the dead. Twelve years ago we butchered the people of Tolkemec, but the feud raged on between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, as it will rage until the last man, the last woman is dead.____'It was fifty years ago that Tecuhltli stole the wife of Xotalanc. Half a century the feud has endured. I was born in it. All in this chamber, except Tascela, were born in it. We expect to die in it.____'We are a dying race, even as those Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. When the feud began there were hundreds in each faction. Now we of Tecuhltli number only these you see before you, and the men who guard the four doors: forty in all. How many Xotalancas there are we do not know, but I doubt if they are much more numerous than we. For fifteen years no children have been born to us, and we have seen none among the Xotalancas.____'We are dying, but before we die we will slay as many of the men of Xotalanc as the gods permit.'____And with his weird eyes blazing, Olmec spoke long of that grisly feud, fought out in silent chambers and dim halls under the blaze of the green fire-jewels, on floors smoldering with the flames of hell and splashed with deeper crimson from severed veins. In that long butchery a whole generation had perished. Xotalanc was dead, long ago, slain in a grim battle on an ivory stair. Tecuhldi was dead, flayed alive by the maddened Xotalancas who had captured him.____Without emotion Olmec told of hideous battles fought in black corridors, of ambushes on twisting stairs, and red butcheries. With a redder, more abysmal gleam in his deep dark eyes he told of men and women flayed alive, mutilated and dismembered, of captives howling under tortures so ghastly that even the barbarous Cimmerian grunted. No wonder Techotl had trembled with the terror of capture. Yet he had gone forth to slay if he could, driven by hate that was stronger than his fear. Olmec spoke further, of dark and mysterious matters, of black magic and wizardry conjured out of the black night of the catacombs, of weird creatures invoked out of darkness for horrible allies. In these things the Xotalancas had the advantage, for it was in the eastern catacombs where lay the bones of the greatest wizards of the ancient Xuchotlans, with their immemorial secrets.____Valeria listened with morbid fascination. The feud had become a terrible elemental power driving the people of Xuch-od inexorably on to doom and extinction. It filled dieir whole lives. They were born in it, and they expected to die in it. They never left their barricaded casde except to steal fordi into die Halls of Silence that lay between die opposing fortresses, to slay and be slain. Sometimes die raiders returned widi frantic captives, or with grim tokens of victory in fight. Sometimes diey did not return at all, or returned only as severed limbs cast down before die bolted bronze doors. It was a ghasdy, unreal nightmare existence diese people lived, shut off from die rest of the world, caught together like rabid rats in the same trap, butchering one anodier dirough die years, crouching and creeping through the sunless corridors to maim and torture and murder.____While Olmec talked, Valeria felt die blazing eyes of Tascela fixed upon her. The princess seemed not to hear

what Olmec was saying. Her expression, as he narrated victories or defeats, did not mirror the wild rage or fiendish exultation that alternated on the faces of the other Tecuhldi. The feud that was an obsession to her clansmen seemed meaningless to her. Valeria found her indifferent callousness more repugnant than Olmec's naked ferocity.____'And we can never leave the city,' said Olmec. 'For fifty years no one has left it except those?' Again he checked himself.____'Even without the peril of the dragons,' he continued, 'we who were born and raised in the city would not dare leave it.____We have never set foot outside the walls. We are not accustomed to the open sky and the naked sun. No; we were born in Xuchotl, and in Xuchotl we shall die.'____'Well,' said Conan, 'with your leave we'll take our chances with the dragons. This feud is none of our business. If you'll show us to the west gate we'll be on our way.'____Tascela's hands clenched, and she started to speak, but Olmec interrupted her: 'It is nearly nightfall. If you wander forth into the plain by night, you will certainly fall prey to the dragons.'____'We crossed it last night, and slept in the open without seeing any,' returned Conan.____Tascela smiled mirthlessly. 'You dare not leave Xuchotl!'____Conan glared at her with instinctive antagonism; she was not looking at him, but at the woman opposite him.____'I think they dare,' retorted Olmec. 'But look you, Conan and Valeria, the gods must have sent you to us, to cast victory into the laps of the Tecuhltli! You are professional fighters - why not fight for us? We have wealth in abundance - precious jewels are as common in Xuchotl as cobblestones are in the cities of the world. Some the Xuchotlans brought with them from Kosala. Some, like the firestones, they found in the hills to the east. Aid us to wipe out the Xotalancas, and we will give you all the jewels you can carry.'____'And will you help us destroy the dragons?' asked Valeria. 'With bows and poisoned arrows thirty men could slay all the dragons in the forest.'____'Aye!' replied Olmec promptly. 'We have forgotten the use of the bow, in years of hand-to-hand fighting, but we can learn again.'____'What do you say?' Valeria inquired of Conan.____'We're both penniless vagabonds,' he grinned hardily. 'I'd as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody.'____'Then you agree?' exclaimed Olmec, while Techotl fairly hugged himself with delight.____'Aye. And now suppose you show us chambers where we can sleep, so we can be fresh tomorrow for the beginning of the slaying.'____Olmec nodded, and waved a hand, and Techotl and a woman led the adventurers into a corridor which led through a door off to the left of the jade dais. A glance back showed Valeria Olmec sitting on his throne, chin on knotted fist, staring after them. His eyes burned with a weird flame. Tascela leaned back in her seat, whispering to the sullen-faced maid, Yasala, who leaned over her shoulder, her ear to the princess' moving lips.____The hallway was not so broad as most they had traversed, but it was long. Presently the woman halted, opened a door, and drew aside for Valeria to enter.____'Wait a minute,' growled Conan. 'Where do I sleep?'____Techotl pointed to a chamber across the hallway, but one door farther down. Conan hesitated, and seemed inclined to raise an objection, but Valeria smiled spitefully at him and shut the door in his face. He muttered something uncomplimentary about women in general, and strode off down the corridor after Techotl.____In the ornate chamber where he was to sleep, he glanced up at the slot-like skylights. Some were wide enough to admit the body of a slender man, supposing the glass were broken.____'Why don't the Xotalancas come over the roofs and shatter those skylights?' he asked.____'They cannot be broken,' answered Techotl. 'Besides, the roofs would be hard to clamber over. They are

mostly spires and domes and steep ridges.'___He volunteered more information about the 'castle' of Tecuhltli. Like the rest of the city it contained four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier was named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl had a name for each chamber, hall and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhltli the floors were named The Eagle's Tier, the Ape's Tier, The Tiger's Tier and The Serpent's Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle's Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor. ___'Who is Tascela?' asked Conan. 'Olmec's wife?'___Techotl shuddered and glanced furtively about him before answering. ___'No. She is - Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc - the woman Tecuhltli stole, to start the feud.'___'What are you talking about?' demanded Conan. 'That woman is beautiful and young. Are you trying to tell me that she was a wife fifty years ago?'___'Aye! I swear it! She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch, who possesses the secret of perpetual youth.'___'What's that?' asked Conan. ___Techotl shuddered again. ___'Ask me not! I dare not speak. It is too grisly, even for Xuchotl!'___And touching his finger to his lips, he glided from the chamber. _____4 Scent of Black Lotus_____Valeria unbuckled her sword-belt and laid it with the sheathed weapon on the couch where she meant to sleep. She noted that the doors were supplied with bolts, and asked where they led. ___'Those lead into adjoining chambers,' answered the woman, indicating the doors on right and left. 'That one' - pointing to a copper-bound door opposite that which opened into the corridor - 'leads to a corridor which runs to a stair that descends into the catacombs. Do not fear; naught can harm you here.'___'Who spoke of fear?' snapped Valeria. 'I just like to know what sort of harbor I'm dropping anchor in. No, I don't want you to sleep at the foot of my couch. I'm not accustomed to being waited on - not by women, anyway. You have my leave to go.'___Alone in the room, the pirate shot the bolts on all the doors, kicked off her boots and stretched luxuriously out on the couch. She imagined Conan similarly situated across the corridor, but her feminine vanity prompted her to visualize him as scowling and muttering with chagrin as he cast himself on his solitary couch, and she grinned with gleeful malice as she prepared herself for slumber. ___Outside, night had fallen. In the halls of Xuchotl the green fire-jewels blazed like the eyes of prehistoric cats. Somewhere among the dark towers a night wind moaned like a restless spirit. Through the dim passages stealthy figures began stealing, like disembodied shadows. ___Valeria awoke suddenly on her couch. In the dusky emerald glow of the fire-gems she saw a shadowy figure bending over her. For a bemused instant the apparition seemed part of the dream she had been dreaming. She had seemed to lie on the couch in the chamber as she was actually lying, while over her pulsed and throbbed a gigantic black blossom so enormous that it hid the ceiling. Its exotic perfume pervaded her being, inducing a delicious, sensuous languor that was something more and less than sleep. She was sinking into scented billows of insensible bliss, when something touched her face. So supersensitive were her drugged senses, that the light touch was like a dislocating impact, jolting her rudely into full wakefulness. Then it was that she saw, not a gargantuan blossom, but a dark-skinned woman standing above her. ___With the realization came anger and instant action. The woman turned lithely, but before she could run Valeria was on her feet and had caught her arm. She fought like a wildcat for an instant, and then

subsided as she felt herself crushed by the superior strength of her captor. The pirate wrenched the woman around to face her, caught her chin with her free hand and forced her captive to meet her gaze. It was the sullen Yasala, Tascela's maid. ___'What the devil were you doing bending over me? What's that in your hand?' ___The woman made no reply, but sought to cast away the object. Valeria twisted her arm around in front of her, and the thing fell to the floor - a great black exotic blossom on a jade-green stem, large as a woman's head, to be sure, but tiny beside the exaggerated vision she had seen. ___'The black lotus!' said Valeria between her teeth. 'The blossom whose scent brings deep sleep. You were trying to drug me! If you hadn't accidentally touched my face with the petals, you'd have - why did you do it? What's your game?' ___Yasala maintained a sulky silence, and with an oath Valeria whirled her around, forced her to her knees and twisted her arm up behind her back. ___'Tell me, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket!' ___Yasala squirmed in anguish as her arm was forced excruciatingly up between her shoulder-blades, but a violent shaking of her head was the only answer she made. ___'Slut!' Valeria cast her from her to sprawl on the floor. The pirate glared at the prostrate figure with blazing eyes. Fear and the memory of Tascela's burning eyes stirred in her, rousing all her tigerish instincts of self-preservation. These people were decadent; any sort of perversity might be expected to be encountered among them. But Valeria sensed here something that moved behind the scenes, some secret terror fouler than common degeneracy. Fear and revulsion of this weird city swept her. These people were neither sane nor normal; she began to doubt if they were even human. Madness smoldered in the eyes of them all - all except the cruel, cryptic eyes of Tascela, which held secrets and mysteries more abysmal than madness. ___She lifted her head and listened intently. The halls of Xuchotl were as silent as if it were in reality a dead city. The green jewels bathed the chamber in a nightmare glow, in which the eyes of the woman on the floor glittered eerily up at her. A thrill of panic throbbed through Valeria, driving the last vestige of mercy from her fierce soul. ___'Why did you try to drug me?' she muttered, grasping the woman's black hair, and forcing her head back to glare into her sullen, long-lashed eyes. 'Did Tascela send you?' ___No answer. Valeria cursed venomously and slapped the woman first on one cheek and then the other. The blows resounded through the room, but Yasala made no outcry. ___'Why don't you scream?' demanded Valeria savagely. 'Do you fear someone will hear you? Whom do you fear? Tascela? Olmec? Conan?' ___Yasala made no reply. She crouched, watching her captor with eyes baleful as those of a basilisk. Stubborn silence always fans anger. Valeria turned and tore a handful of cords from a nearby hanging. ___'You sulky slut!' she said between her teeth. 'I'm going to strip you stark naked and tie you across that couch and whip you until you tell me what you were doing here, and who sent you!' ___Yasala made no verbal protest, nor did she offer any resistance, as Valeria carried out the first part of her threat with a fury that her captive's obstinacy only sharpened. Then for a space there was no sound in the chamber except the whistle and crackle of hard-woven silken cords on naked flesh. Yasala could not move her fast-bound hands or feet. Her body writhed and quivered under the chastisement, her head swayed from side to side in rhythm with the blows. Her teeth were sunk into her lower lip and a trickle of blood began as the punishment continued. But she did not cry out. ___The pliant cords made no great sound as they encountered the quivering body of the captive; only a sharp crackling snap, but each cord left a red streak across Yasala's dark flesh.

Valeria inflicted the punishment with all the strength of her war-hardened arm, with all the mercilessness acquired during a life where pain and torment were daily happenings, and with all the cynical ingenuity which only a woman displays towards a woman. Yasala suffered more, physically and mentally, than she would have suffered under a lash wielded by a man, however strong. ___It was the application of this feminine cynicism which at last tamed Yasala. ___A low whimper escaped from her lips, and Valeria paused, arm lifted, and raked back a damp yellow lock. 'Well, are you going to talk?' she demanded. 'I can keep this up all night, if necessary!' ___'Mercy!' whispered the woman. 'I will tell.' ___Valeria cut the cords from her wrists and ankles, and pulled to her feet. Yasala sank down on the couch, half reclining on one bare hip, supporting herself on her arm, and writhing at the contact of her smarting flesh with the couch. She was trembling in every limb. ___'Wine!' she begged, dry-lipped, indicating with a quivering hand a gold vessel on an ivory table. 'Let me drink. I am weak with pain. Then I will tell you all.' ___Valeria picked up the vessel, and Yasala rose unsteadily to receive it. She took it, raised it toward her lips - then dashed the contents full into the Aquilonian's face. Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall. The pirate was after her instantly, sword out and murder in her heart. ___But Yasala had the start, and she ran with the nervous agility of a woman who has just been whipped to the point of hysterical frenzy. She rounded a corner in the corridor, yards ahead of Valeria, and when the pirate turned it, she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead. ___Valeria advanced to the door and looked down a flight of stone steps that vanished quickly into utter blackness. Evidently it was a shaft that led straight to the pits below the city, without opening upon any of the lower floors. She shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their moldering cloths. She had no intention of groping her way down those stone steps. Yasala doubtless knew every turn and twist of the subterranean tunnels. ___She was turning back, baffled and furious, when a sobbing cry welled up from the blackness. It seemed to come from a great depth, but human words were faintly distinguishable, and the voice was that of a woman. 'Oh, help! Help, in Set's name! Ahhh!' It trailed away, and Valeria thought she caught the echo of a ghostly tittering. ___Valeria felt her skin crawl. What had happened to Yasala down there in the thick blackness? There was no doubt that it had been she who had cried out. But what peril could have befallen her? Was a Xotalanca lurking down there? Olmec had assured them that the catacombs below Tecuhltli were walled off from the rest, too securely for their enemies to break through. Besides, that tittering had not sounded like a human being at all. ___Valeria hurried back down the corridor, not stopping to close the door that opened on the stair. Regaining her chamber, she closed the door and shot the bolt behind her. She pulled on her boots and buckled her sword-belt about her. She was determined to make her way to Conan's room and urge him, if he still lived, to join her in an attempt to fight their way out of that city of devils. ___But even as she reached the door that opened into the corridor, a long-drawn scream of agony rang through the halls, followed by the stamp of running feet and the loud clangor of

swords._____5 Twenty Red Nails_____Two warriors lounged in the guardroom on the floor known as the Tier of the Eagle. Their attitude was casual, though habitually alert. An attack on the great bronze door from without was always a possibility, but for many years no such assault had been attempted on either side.____'The strangers are strong allies,' said one. 'Olmec will move against the enemy tomorrow, I believe.'____He spoke as a soldier in a war might have spoken. In the miniature world of Xuchotl each handful of feudists was an army, and the empty halls between the castles was the country over which they campaigned.____The other meditated for a space.____'Suppose with their aid we destroy Xotalanc,' he said. 'What then, Xatmec?'____'Why,' returned Xatmec, 'we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn and flay and quarter.'____'But afterward?' pursued the other. 'After we have slain them all? Will it not seem strange, to have no foes to fight? All my life I have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?'____Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that.____Suddenly both men stiffened at a noise outside the door. 'To the door, Xatmec!' hissed the last speaker. 'I shall look through the Eye?'____Xatmec, sword in hand, leaned against the bronze door, straining his ear to hear through the metal. His mate looked into the mirror. He started convulsively. Men were clustered thickly outside the door; grim, dark-faced men with swords gripped in their teeth - and their fingers thrust into their ears. One who wore a feathered headdress had a set of pipes which he set to his lips, and even as the Tecuhltli started to shout a warning, the pipes began to skirl.____The cry died in the guard's throat as the thin, weird piping penetrated the metal door and smote on his ears. Xatmec leaned frozen against the door, as if paralysed in that position. His face was that of a wooden image, his expression one of horrified listening. The other guard, farther removed from the source of the sound, yet sensed the horror of what was taking place, the grisly threat that lay in that demoniac piping. He felt the weird strains plucking like unseen fingers at the tissues of his brain, filling him with alien emotions and impulses of madness. But with a soul-tearing effort he broke the spell, and shrieked a warning in a voice he did not recognize as his own.____But even as he cried out, the music changed to an unbearable shrilling that was like a knife in the eardrums. Xatmec screamed in sudden agony, and all the sanity went out of his face like a flame blown out in a wind. Like a madman he ripped loose the chain, tore open the door and rushed out into the hall, sword lifted before his mate could stop him. A dozen blades struck him down, and over his mangled body the Xotalancas surged into the guardroom, with a long-drawn, blood-mad yell that sent the unwonted echoes reverberating.____His brain reeling from the shock of it all, the remaining guard leaped to meet them with goring spear. The horror of the sorcery he had just witnessed was submerged in the stunning realization that the enemy were in Tecuhltli. And as his spearhead ripped through a dark-skinned belly he knew no more, for a swinging sword crushed his skull, even as wild-eyed warriors came pouring in from the chambers behind the guardroom.____It was the yelling of men and the clanging of steel that brought Conan bounding from his couch, wide awake and broadsword in hand. In an instant he had reached the door and flung it open, and was glaring out into the corridor just as Techotl rushed up it, eyes blazing madly.____'The Xotalancas!' he screamed, in a voice hardly human. 'They are within the door.'____Conan ran down the corridor, even as Valeria emerged from her chamber.____'What the devil is it?' she

called. 'Techotl says the Xotalancas are in,' he answered hurriedly. 'That racket sounds like it.' With the Tecuhltli on their heels they burst into the throne-room and were confronted by a scene beyond the most frantic dream of blood and fury. Twenty men and women, their black hair streaming, and the white skulls gleaming on their breasts, were locked in combat with the people of Tecuhltli. The women on both sides fought as madly as the men, and already the room and the hall beyond were strewn with corpses. Olmec, naked but for a breech-clout, was fighting before his throne, and as the adventurers entered, Tascela ran from an inner chamber with a sword in her hand. Xatmec and his mate were dead, so there was none to tell the Tecuhltli how their foes had found their way into their citadel. Nor was there any to say what had prompted that mad attempt. But the losses of the Xotalancas had been greater, their position more desperate, than the Tecuhltli had known. The maiming of their scaly ally, the destruction of the Burning Skull, and the news, gasped by a dying man, that mysterious white-skin allies had joined their enemies, had driven them to the frenzy of desperation and the wild determination to die dealing death to their ancient foes. The Tecuhltli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprise that had swept them back into the throneroom and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the door-guards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the death-fight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it. But the conclusion was inevitable. The Tecuhltli outnumbered the invaders almost two to one, and they were heartened by that fact and by the entrance into the melee of their light-skinned allies. These crashed into the fray with the devastating effect of a hurricane plowing through a grove of saplings. In sheer strength no three Tlazitlans were a match for Conan, and in spite of his weight he was quicker on his feet than any of them. He moved through the whirling, eddying mass with the surety and destructiveness of a gray wolf amidst a pack of alley curs, and he strode over a wake of crumpled figures. Valeria fought beside him, her lips smiling and her eyes blazing. She was stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious. Her sword was like a living thing in her hand. Where Conan beat down opposition by the sheer weight and power of his blows, breaking spears, splitting skulls and cleaving bosoms to the breastbone, Valeria brought into action a finesse of swordplay that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them. Again and again a warrior, heaving high his heavy blade, found her point in his jugular before he could strike. Conan, towering above the field, strode through the welter smiting right and left, but Valeria moved like an illusive phantom, constantly shifting, and thrusting and slashing as she shifted. Swords missed her again and again as the wielders flailed the empty air and died with her point in their hearts or throats, and her mocking laughter in their ears. Neither sex nor condition was considered by the maddened combatants. The five women of the Xotalancas were down with their throats cut before Conan and Valeria entered the fray, and when a man or woman went down under the stamping feet, there was always a knife ready for the helpless throat, or a sandaled foot eager to crush the prostrate skull. From wall to wall, from door to door rolled the

waves of combat, spilling over into adjoining chambers. And presently only Tecuhltli and their white-skinned allies stood upright in the great throneroom. The survivors stared bleakly and blankly at each other, like survivors after Judgment Day or the destruction of the world. On legs wide-braced, hands gripping notched and dripping swords, blood trickling down their arms, they stared at one another across the mangled corpses of friends and foes. They had no breath left to shout, but a bestial mad howling rose from their lips. It was not a human cry of triumph. It was the howling of a rabid wolf-pack stalking among the bodies of its victims. ___Conan caught Valeria's arm and turned her about. ___'You've got a stab in the calf of your leg,' he growled. ___She glanced down, for the first time aware of a stinging in the muscles of her leg. Some dying man on the floor had fleshed his dagger with his last effort. ___'You look like a butcher yourself,' she laughed. ___He shook a red shower from his hands. ___'Not mine. Oh, a scratch here and there. Nothing to bother about. But that calf ought to be bandaged.' ___Olmec came through the litter, looking like a ghoul with his naked massive shoulders splashed with blood, and his black beard dabbled in crimson. His eyes were red, like the reflection of flame on black water. ___'We have won!' he croaked dazedly. 'The feud is ended! The dogs of Xotalanc lie dead! Oh, for a captive to flay alive! Yet it is good to look upon their dead faces. Twenty dead dogs! Twenty red nails for the black column!' ___'You'd best see to your wounded,' grunted Conan, turning away from him. 'Here, girl, let me see that leg.' ___'Wait a minute!' she shook him off impatiently. The fire of fighting still burned brightly in her soul. 'How do we know these are all of them? These might have come on a raid of their own.' ___'They would not split the clan on a foray like this,' said Olmec, shaking his head, and regaining some of his ordinary intelligence. Without his purple robe the man seemed less like a prince than some repellent beast of prey. 'I will stake my head upon it that we have slain them all. There were less of them than I dreamed, and they must have been desperate. But how came they in Tecuhltli?' ___Tascela came forward, wiping her sword on her naked thigh, and holding in her other hand an object she had taken from the body of the feathered leader of the Xotalancas. ___'The pipes of madness,' she said. 'A warrior tells me that Xatmec opened the door to the Xotalancas and was cut down as they stormed into the guardroom. This warrior came to the guardroom from the inner hall just in time to see it happen and to hear the last of a weird strain of music which froze his very soul. Tolkemec used to talk of these pipes, which the Xuchot-lans swore were hidden somewhere in the catacombs with the bones of the ancient wizard who used them in his lifetime. Somehow the dogs of Xotalanc found them and learned their secret.' ___'Somebody ought to go to Xotalanc and see if any remain alive,' said Conan. 'I'll go if somebody will guide me.' ___Olmec glanced at the remnants of his people. There were only twenty left alive, and of these several lay groaning on the floor. Tascela was the only one of the Tecuhltli who had escaped without a wound. The princess was untouched, though she had fought as savagely as any. ___'Who will go with Conan to Xotalanc?' asked Olmec. ___Techotl limped forward. The wound in his thigh had started bleeding afresh, and he had another gash across his ribs. ___'I will go!' ___'No, you won't,' vetoed Conan. 'And you're not going either, Valeria. In a little while that leg will be getting stiff.' ___'I will go,' volunteered a warrior, who was knotting a bandage about a slashed forearm. ___'Very well, Yanath. Go with the Cimmerian. And you, too, Topal.' Olmec indicated another man whose injuries were slight. 'But first aid us to lift the badly wounded on

these couches where we may bandage their hurts.'___This was done quickly. As they stooped to pick up a woman who had been stunned by a war-club, Olmec's beard brushed Topal's ear. Conan thought the prince muttered something to the warrior, but he could not be sure. A few moments later he was leading his companions down the hall.___Conan glanced back as he went out the door, at that shambles where the dead lay on the smoldering floor, blood-stained dark limbs knotted in attitudes of fierce muscular effort, dark faces frozen in masks of hate, glassy eyes glaring up at the green fire-jewels which bathed the ghastly scene in a dusky emerald witch-light. Among the dead the living moved aimlessly, like people moving in a trance. Conan heard Olmec call a woman and direct her to bandage Valeria's leg. The pirate followed the woman into an adjoining chamber, already beginning to limp slightly.___Warily the two Tecuhltli led Conan along the hall beyond the bronze door, and through chamber after chamber shimmering in the green fire. They saw no one, heard no sound. After they crossed the Great Hall which bisected the city from north to south, their caution was increased by the realization of their nearness to enemy territory. But chambers and halls lay empty to their wary gaze, and they came at last along a broad dim hallway and halted before a bronze door similar to the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli. Gingerly they tried it, and it opened silently under their fingers. Awed, they stared into the green-lit chambers beyond. For fifty years no Tecuhltli had entered those halls save as a prisoner going to a hideous doom. To go to Xotalanc had been the ultimate horror that could befall a man of the western castle. The terror of it had stalked through their dreams since earliest childhood. To Yanath and Topal that bronze door was like the portal of hell.___They cringed back, unreasoning horror in their eyes, and Conan pushed past them and strode into Xotalanc.___Timidly they followed him. As each man set foot over the threshold he stared and glared wildly about him. But only their quick, hurried breathing disturbed the silence.___They had come into a square guardroom, like that behind the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli, and, similarly, a hall ran away from it to a broad chamber that was a counterpart of Olmec's throneroom.___Conan glanced down the hall with its rugs and divans and hangings, and stood listening intently. He heard no noise, and the rooms had an empty feel. He did not believe there were any Xotalancas left alive in Xuchotl.___'Come on,' he muttered, and started down the hall.___He had not gone far when he was aware that only Yanath was following him. He wheeled back to see Topal standing in an attitude of horror, one arm out as if to fend off some threatening peril, his distended eyes fixed with hypnotic intensity on something protruding from behind a divan.___'What the devil?' Then Conan saw what Topal was staring at, and he felt a faint twitching of the skin between his giant shoulders. A monstrous head protruded from behind the divan, a reptilian head, broad as the head of a crocodile, with down-curving fangs that projected over the lower jaw. But there was an unnatural limpness about the thing, and the hideous eyes were glazed.___Conan peered behind the couch. It was a great serpent which lay there limp in death, but such a serpent as he had never seen in his wanderings. The reek and chill of the deep black earth were about it, and its color was an indeterminable hue which changed with each new angle from which he surveyed it. A great wound in the neck showed what had caused its death.___'It is the Crawler!' whispered Yanath.___'It's the thing I slashed on the stair,' grunted Conan. 'After it trailed us to the Eagle Door, it dragged itself here to die. How could the Xotalancas control such a brute?'___The Tecuhltli shivered and shook their heads.___'They brought

it up from the black tunnels below the catacombs. They discovered secrets unknown to Tecuhtli.'___'Well, it's dead, and if they'd had any more of them, they'd have brought them along when they came to Tecuhtli. Come on.'___They crowded close at his heels as he strode down the hall and thrust on the silver-worked door at the other end.'___'If we don't find anybody on this floor,' he said, 'we'll descend into the lower floors. We'll explore Xotalanc from the roof to the catacombs. If Xotalanc is like Tecuhtli, all the rooms and halls in this tier will be lighted - what the devil!''___They had come into the broad throne-chamber, so similar to that one in Tecuhtli. There were the same jade dais and ivory seat, the same divans, rugs and hangings on the walls. No black, red-scarred column stood behind the throne-dais, but evidences of the grim feud were not lacking.'___Ranged along the wall behind the dais were rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stared at the startled watchers with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years.'___Topal muttered a curse, but Yanath stood silent, the mad light growing in his wide eyes. Conan frowned, knowing that Tlazitlan sanity was hung on a hair-trigger.'___Suddenly Yanath pointed to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.'___'There is my brother's head!' he murmured. 'And there is my father's younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister's eldest son!''___Suddenly he began to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shook his frame. He did not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grew shriller, changed to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn became an unbearable screaming. Yanath was stark mad.'___Conan laid a hand on his shoulder, and as if the touch had released all the frenzy in his soul, Yanath screamed and whirled, striking at the Cimmerian with his sword. Conan parried the blow, and Topal tried to catch Yanath's arm. But the madman avoided him and with froth flying from his lips, he drove his sword deep into Topal's body. Topal sank down with a groan, and Yanath whirled for an instant like a crazy dervish; then he ran at the shelves and began hacking at the glass with his sword, screeching blasphemously.'___Conan sprang at him from behind, trying to catch him unaware and disarm him, but the madman wheeled and lunged at him, screaming like a lost soul. Realizing that the warrior was hopelessly insane, the Cimmerian side-stepped, and as the maniac went past, he swung a cut that severed the shoulder-bone and breast, and dropped the man dead beside his dying victim.'___Conan bent over Topal, seeing that the man was at his last gasp. It was useless to seek to stanch the blood gushing from the horrible wound.'___'You're done for, Topal,' grunted Conan. 'Any word you want to send to your people?''___'Bend closer,' gasped Topal, and Conan complied - and an instant later caught the man's wrist as Topal struck at his breast with a dagger.'___'Crom!' swore Conan. 'Are you mad, too?''___'Olmec ordered it!' gasped the dying man. 'I know not why. As we lifted the wounded upon the couches he whispered to me, bidding me to slay you as we returned to Tecuhtli?' And with the name of his clan on his lips, Topal died.'___Conan scowled down at him in puzzlement. This whole affair had an aspect of lunacy. Was Olmec mad, too? Were all the Tecuhtli madder than he had realized? With a shrug of his shoulders he strode down the hall and out of the bronze door, leaving the dead Tecuhtli lying before the staring dead eyes of their kinsmen's heads.'___Conan needed no guide back through the labyrinth they had traversed. His primitive instinct of direction led him unerringly along the route they had come. He traversed it as warily as he had before, his sword in his hand, and his eyes fiercely searching each shadowed

nook and corner; for it was his former allies he feared now, not the ghosts of the slain Xotalancas. ___He had crossed the Great Hall and entered the chambers beyond when he heard something moving ahead of him - something which gasped and panted, and moved with a strange, floundering, scrambling noise. A moment later Conan saw a man crawling over the flaming floor toward him - a man whose progress left a broad bloody smear on the smoldering surface. It was Techotl and his eyes were already glazing; from a deep gash in his breast blood gushed steadily between the fingers of his clutching hand. With the other he clawed and hitched himself along. ___'Conan,' he cried chokingly, 'Conan! Olmec has taken the yellow-haired woman!' ___'So that's why he told Topal to kill me!' murmured Conan, dropping to his knee beside the man, who his experienced eye told him was dying. 'Olmec isn't so mad as I thought.' ___Techotl's groping fingers plucked at Conan's arm. In the cold, loveless and altogether hideous life of the Tecuhltli his admiration and affection for the invaders from the outer world formed a warm, human oasis, constituted a tie that connected him with a more natural humanity that was totally lacking in his fellows, whose only emotions were hate, lust and the urge of sadistic cruelty. ___'I sought to oppose him,' gurgled Techotl, blood bubbling frothily to his lips. 'But he struck me down. He thought he had slain me, but I crawled away. Ah, Set, how far I have crawled in my own blood! Beware, Conan! Olmec may have set an ambush for your return! Slay Olmec! He is a beast. Take Valeria and flee! Fear not to traverse the forest. Olmec and Tascela lied about the dragons. They slew each other years ago, all save the strongest. For a dozen years there has been only one dragon. If you have slain him, there is naught in the forest to harm you. He was the god Olmec worshipped; and Olmec fed human sacrifices to him, the very old and the very young, bound and hurled from the wall. Hasten! Olmec has taken Valeria to the Chamber of the?' ___His head slumped down and he was dead before it came to rest on the floor. ___Conan sprang up, his eyes like live coals. So that was Olmec's game, having first used the strangers to destroy his foes! He should have known that something of the sort would be going on in that black-bearded degenerate's mind. ___The Cimmerian started toward Tecuhltli with reckless speed. Rapidly he reckoned the numbers of his former allies. Only twenty-one, counting Olmec, had survived that fiendish battle in the throneroom. Three had died since, which left seventeen enemies with which to reckon. In his rage Conan felt capable of accounting for the whole clan single-handed. ___But the innate craft of the wilderness rose to guide his berserk rage. He remembered Techotl's warning of an ambush. It was quite probable that the prince would make such provisions, on the chance that Topal might have failed to carry out his order. ___Olmec would be expecting him to return by the same route he had followed in going to Xotalanc. ___Conan glanced up at the skylight under which he was passing and caught the blurred glimmer of stars. They had not yet begun to pale for dawn. The events of the night had been crowded into a comparatively short space of time. ___He turned aside from his direct course and descended a winding staircase to the floor below. He did not know where the door was to be found that let into the castle on that level, but he knew he could find it. How he was to force the locks he did not know; he believed that the doors of Tecuhltli would all be locked and bolted, if for no other reason than the habits of half a century. But there was nothing else but to attempt it. ___Sword in hand, he hurried noiselessly on through a maze of green-lit or shadowy rooms and halls. He knew he must be near Tecuhltli, when a sound brought him up short. He recognized it for what it was - a human being trying to

cry out through a stifling gag. It came from somewhere ahead of him, and to the left. In those deathly-still chambers a small sound carried a long way. Conan turned aside and went seeking after the sound, which continued to be repeated. Presently he was glaring through a doorway upon a weird scene. In the room into which he was looking a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a giant figure was bound prostrate upon it. His head rested on a bed of iron spikes, which were already crimson-pointed with blood where they had pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance was fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band did not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness was connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upheld a huge iron ball which was suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as the man could force himself to remain motionless the iron ball hung in its place. But when the pain of the iron points caused him to lift his head, the ball lurched downwards a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles would no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it would fall back on the spikes again. It was obvious that eventually the ball would crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim was gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes rolled wildly toward the man in the doorway, who stood in silent amazement. The man on the rack was Olmec, prince of Tecuhtli.

6 The Eyes of Tascela

'Why did you bring me into this chamber to bandage my legs?' demanded Valeria. 'Couldn't you have done it just as well in the throneroom?' She sat on a couch with her wounded leg extended upon it, and the Tecuhtli woman had just bound it with silk bandages. Valeria's red-stained sword lay on the couch beside her. She frowned as she spoke. The woman had done her task silently and efficiently, but Valeria liked neither the lingering, caressing touch of her slim fingers nor the expression in her eyes. 'They have taken the rest of the wounded into the other chambers,' answered the woman in the soft speech of the Tecuhtli women, which somehow did not suggest either softness or gentleness in the speakers. A little while before, Valeria had seen this same woman stab a Xotalanca woman through the breast and stamp the eyeballs out of a wounded Xotalanca man. 'They will be carrying the corpses of the dead down into the catacombs,' she added, 'lest the ghosts escape into the chambers and dwell there.' 'Do you believe in ghosts?' asked Valeria. 'I know the ghost of Tolkemec dwells in the catacombs,' she answered with a shiver. 'Once I saw it, as I crouched in a crypt among the bones of a dead queen. It passed by in the form of an ancient man with flowing white beard and locks, and luminous eyes that blazed in the darkness. It was Tolkemec; I saw him living when I was a child and he was being tortured.' Her voice sank to a fearful whisper: 'Olmec laughs, but I know Tolkemec's ghost dwells in the catacombs! They say it is rats which gnaw the flesh from the bones of the newly dead -but ghosts eat flesh. Who knows but that?' She glanced up quickly as a shadow fell across the couch. Valeria looked up to see Olmec gazing down at her. The prince had cleansed his hands, torso and beard of the blood that had splashed them; but he had not donned his robe, and his great dark-skinned hairless body and limbs renewed the impression of strength bestial in its nature. His deep black eyes burned with a more elemental light, and there was the suggestion of a twitching in the fingers that tugged at his thick blue-black beard. He stared fixedly at the woman, and she rose and glided from the chamber. As she passed through the door she cast a look over her shoulder at Valeria, a glance full of cynical derision and obscene mockery. 'She has done a clumsy job,' criticized the prince, coming to the divan and bending over the

bandage. 'Let me see?___With a quickness amazing in one of his bulk he snatched her sword and threw it across the chamber. His next move was to catch her in his giant arms.___Quick and unexpected as the move was, she almost matched it; for even as he grabbed her, her dirk was in her hand and she stabbed murderously at his throat. More by luck than skill he caught her wrist, and then began a savage wrestling-match. She fought him with fists, feet, knees, teeth and nails, with all the strength of her magnificent body and all the knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting she had acquired in her years of roving and fighting on sea and land. It availed her nothing against his brute strength. She lost her dirk in the first moment of contact, and thereafter found herself powerless to inflict any appreciable pain on her giant attacker.___The blaze in his weird black eyes did not alter, and their expression filled her with fury, fanned by the sardonic smile that seemed carved upon his bearded lips. Those eyes and that smile contained all the cruel cynicism that seethes below the surface of a sophisticated and degenerate race, and for the first time in her life Valeria experienced fear of a man. It was like struggling against some huge elemental force; his iron arms thwarted her efforts with an ease that sent panic racing through her limbs. He seemed impervious to any pain she could inflict. Only once, when she sank her white teeth savagely into his wrist so that the blood started, did he react. And that was to buffet her brutally upon the side of the head with his open hand, so that stars flashed before her eyes and her head rolled on her shoulders.___Her shirt had been torn open in the struggle, and with cynical cruelty he rasped his thick beard across her bare breasts, bringing the blood to suffuse the fair skin, and fetching a cry of pain and outraged fury from her. Her convulsive resistance was useless; she was crushed down on a couch, disarmed and panting, her eyes blazing up at him like the eyes of a trapped tigress.___A moment later he was hurrying from the chamber, carrying her in his arms. She made no resistance, but the smoldering of her eyes showed that she was not unconquered in spirit, at least. She had not cried out. She knew that Conan was not within call, and it did not occur to her that any in Tecuhltli would oppose their prince. But she noticed that Olmec went stealthily, with his head on one side as if listening for sounds of pursuit, and he did not return to the throne-chamber. He carried her through a door that stood opposite that through which he had entered, crossed another room and began stealing down a hall. As she became convinced that he feared some opposition to the abduction, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lusty voice.___She was rewarded by a slap that half stunned her, and Olmec quickened his pace to a shambling run.___But her cry had been echoed, and twisting her head about, Valeria, through the tears and stars that partly blinded her, saw Techotl limping after them.___Olmec turned with a snarl, shifting the woman to an uncomfortable and certainly undignified position under one huge arm, where he held her writhing and kicking vainly, like a child'___'Olmec!' protested Techotl. 'You cannot be such a dog as to do this thing! She is Conan's woman! She helped us slay the Xotalancas, and?'___Without a word Olmec balled his free hand into a huge fist and stretched the wounded warrior senseless at his feet.___Stooping, and hindered not at all by the struggles and imprecations of his captive, he drew Techotl's sword from its sheath and stabbed the warrior in the breast. Then casting aside the weapon he fled on along the corridor. He did not see a woman's dark face peer cautiously after him from behind a hanging. It vanished, and presently Techotl groaned and stirred, rose dazedly and staggered drunkenly away,

calling Conan's name. ___Olmec hurried on down the corridor, and descended a winding ivory staircase. He crossed several corridors and halted at last in a broad chamber whose doors were veiled with heavy tapestries, with one exception - a heavy bronze door similar to the Door of the Eagle on the upper floor. ___He was moved to rumble, pointing to it: 'That is one of the outer doors of Tecuhltli. For the first time in fifty years it is unguarded. We need not guard it now, for Xotalanc is no more.' ___'Thanks to Conan and me, you bloody rogue!' sneered Valeria, trembling with fury and the shame of physical coercion. 'You treacherous dog! Conan will cut your throat for this!' ___Olmec did not bother to voice his belief that Conan's own gullet had already been severed according to his whispered command. He was too utterly cynical to be at all interested in her thoughts or opinions. His flame-lit eyes devoured her, dwelling burningly on the generous expanse of clear white flesh exposed where her shirt and breeches had been torn in the struggle. ___'Forget Conan,' he said thickly. 'Olmec is lord of Xuchotl. Xotalanc is no more. There will be no more fighting. We shall spend our lives in drinking and lovemaking. First let us drink!' ___He seated himself on an ivory table and pulled her down on his knees, like a dark-skinned satyr with a white nymph in his arms. Ignoring her unnymphlike profanity, he held her helpless with one great arm about her waist while the other reached across the table and secured a vessel of wine. ___'Drink!' he commanded, forcing it to her lips, as she writhed her head away. ___The liquor slopped over, stinging her lips, splashing down on her naked breasts. ___'Your guest does not like your wine, Olmec,' spoke a cool, sardonic voice. ___Olmec stiffened; fear grew in his flaming eyes. Slowly he swung his great head about and stared at Tascela who posed negligently in the curtained doorway, one hand on her smooth hip. Valeria twisted herself about in his iron grip, and when she met the burning eyes of Tascela, a chill tingled along her supple spine. New experiences were flooding Valeria's proud soul that night. Recently she had learned to fear a man; now she knew what it was to fear a woman. ___Olmec sat motionless, a gray pallor growing under his swarthy skin. Tascela brought her other hand from behind her and displayed a small gold vessel. ___'I feared she would not like your wine, Olmec,' purred the princess, 'so I brought some of mine, some I brought with me long ago from the shores of Lake Zuad - do you understand, Olmec?' ___Beads of sweat stood out suddenly on Olmec's brow. His muscles relaxed, and Valeria broke away and put the table between them. But though reason told her to dart from the room, some fascination she could not understand held her rigid, watching the scene. ___Tascela came toward the seated prince with a swaying, undulating walk that was mockery in itself. Her voice was soft, slurringly caressing, but her eyes gleamed. Her slim fingers stroked his beard lightly. ___'You are selfish, Olmec,' she crooned, smiling. 'You would keep our handsome guest to yourself, though you knew I wished to entertain her. You are much at fault, Olmec!' ___The mask dropped for an instant; her eyes flashed, her face was contorted and with an appalling show of strength her hand locked convulsively in his beard and tore out a great handful. This evidence of unnatural strength was no more terrifying than the momentary baring of the hellish fury that raged under her bland exterior. ___Olmec lurched up with a roar, and stood swaying like a bear, his mighty hands clenching and unclenching. ___'Slut!' His booming voice filled the room. 'Witch! She-devil! Tecuhltli should have slain you fifty years ago! Begone! I have endured too much from you! This white-skinned wench is mine! Get hence before I slay you!' ___The princess laughed and dashed the blood-stained

strands into his face. Her laughter was less merciful than the ring of flint on steel.____'Once you spoke otherwise, Olmec,' she taunted. 'Once, in your youth, you spoke words of love. Aye, you were my lover once, years ago, and because you loved me, you slept in my arms beneath the enchanted lotus - and thereby put into my hands the chains that enslaved you. You know you cannot withstand me. You know I have but to gaze into your eyes, with the mystic power a priest of Stygia taught me, long ago, and you are powerless. You remember the night beneath the black lotus that waved above us, stirred by no worldly breeze; you scent again the unearthly perfumes that stole and rose like a cloud about you to enslave you. You cannot fight against me. You are my slave as you were that night - as you shall be so long as you shall live, Olmec of Xuchotl!'____Her voice had sunk to a murmur like the rippling of a stream running through starlit darkness. She leaned close to the prince and spread her long tapering fingers upon his giant breast. His eyes glazed, his great hands fell limply to his sides.____With a smile of cruel malice, Tascela lifted the vessel and placed it to his lips.____'Drink!'____Mechanically the prince obeyed. And instantly the glaze passed from his eyes and they were flooded with fury, comprehension and an awful fear. His mouth gaped, but no sound issued. For an instant he reeled on buckling knees, and then fell in a sodden heap on the floor.____His fall jolted Valeria out of her paralysis. She turned and sprang toward the door, but with a movement that would have shamed a leaping panther, Tascela was before her. Valeria struck at her with her clenched fist, and all the power of her supple body behind the blow. It would have stretched a man senseless on the floor. But with a lithe twist of her torso, Tascela avoided the blow and caught the pirate's wrist. The next instant Valeria's left hand was imprisoned, and holding her wrists together with one hand, Tascela calmly bound them with a cord she drew from her girdle. Valeria thought she had tasted the ultimate in humiliation already that night, but her shame at being manhandled by Olmec was nothing to the sensations that now shook her supple frame. Valeria had always been inclined to despise the other members of her sex; and it was overwhelming to encounter another woman who could handle her like a child. She scarcely resisted at all when Tascela forced her into a chair and drawing her bound wrists down between her knees, fastened them to the chair.____Casually stepping over Olmec, Tascela walked to the bronze door and shot the bolt and threw it open, revealing a hallway without.____'Opening upon this hall,' she remarked, speaking to her feminine captive for the first time, 'there is a chamber which in old times was used as a torture room. When we retired into Tecuhtli, we brought most of the apparatus with us, but there was one piece too heavy to move. It is still in working order. I think it will be quite convenient now.'____An understanding flame of terror rose in Olmec's eyes. Tascela strode back to him, bent and gripped him by the hair.____'He is only paralysed temporarily,' she remarked conversationally. 'He can hear, think, and feel - aye, he can feel very well indeed!'____With which sinister observation she started toward the door, dragging the giant bulk with an ease that made the pirate's eyes dilate. She passed into the hall and moved down it without hesitation, presently disappearing with her captive into a chamber that opened into it, and whence shortly thereafter issued the clank of iron.____Valeria swore softly and tugged vainly, with her legs braced against the chair. The cords that confined her were apparently unbreakable.____Tascela presently returned alone; behind her a muffled groaning issued from the chamber. She closed the door but did not bolt it. Tascela was beyond the grip of habit, as she was beyond the touch

of other human instincts and emotions. ___Valeria sat dumbly, watching the woman in whose slim hands, the pirate realized, her destiny now rested. ___Tascela grasped her yellow locks and forced back her head, looking impersonally down into her face. But the glitter in her dark eyes was not impersonal. ___'I have chosen you for a great honor,' she said. 'You shall restore the youth of Tascela. Oh, you stare at that! My appearance is that of youth, but through my veins creeps the sluggish chill of approaching age, as I have felt it a thousand times before. I am old, so old I do not remember my childhood. But I was a girl once, and a priest of Stygia loved me, and gave me the secret of immortality and youth everlasting. He died, then - some said by poison. But I dwelt in my palace by the shores of Lake Zuad and the passing years touched me not. So at last a king of Stygia desired me, and my people rebelled and brought me to this land. Olmec called me a princess. I am not of royal blood. I am greater than a princess. I am Tascela, whose youth your own glorious youth shall restore.' ___Valeria's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She sensed here a mystery darker than the degeneracy she had anticipated. ___The taller woman unbound the Aquilonian's wrists and pulled her to her feet. It was not fear of the dominant strength that lurked in the princess' limbs that made Valeria a helpless, quivering captive in her hands. It was the burning, hypnotic, terrible eyes of Tascela. _____7 He Comes from the Dark _____'Well, I'm a Kushite!' ___Conan glared down at the man on the iron rack. ___'What the devil are you doing on that thing?' ___Incoherent sounds issued from behind the gag and Conan bent and tore it away, evoking a bellow of fear from the captive; for his action caused the iron ball to lurch down until it nearly touched the broad breast. ___'Be careful, for Set's sake!' begged Olmec. ___'What for?' demanded Conan. 'Do you think I care what happens to you? I only wish I had time to stay here and watch that chunk of iron grind your guts out. But I'm in a hurry. Where's Valeria?' ___'Loose me!' urged Olmec. 'I will tell you all!' ___'Tell me first.' ___'Never!' The prince's heavy jaws set stubbornly. ___'All right.' Conan seated himself on a near-by bench. 'I'll find her myself, after you've been reduced to a jelly. I believe I can speed up that process by twisting my sword-point around in your ear,' he added, extending the weapon experimentally. ___'Wait!' Words came in a rush from the captive's ashy lips. 'Tascela took her from me. I've never been anything but a puppet in Tascela's hands.' ___'Tascela?' snorted Conan, and spat. 'Why, the filthy?' ___'No, no!' panted Olmec. 'It's worse than you think. Tascela is old - centuries old. She renews her life and her youth by the sacrifice of beautiful young women. That's one thing that has reduced the clan to its present state. She will draw the essence of Valeria's life into her own body, and bloom with fresh vigor and beauty.' ___'Are the doors locked?' asked Conan, thumbing his sword edge. ___'Aye! But I know a way to get into Tecuhltli. Only Tascela and I know, and she thinks me helpless and you slain. Free me and I swear I will help you rescue Valeria. Without my help you cannot win into Techultli; for even if you tortured me into revealing the secret, you couldn't work it. Let me go and we will steal on Tascela and kill her before she can work magic -before she can fix her eyes on us. A knife thrown from behind will do the work. I should have killed her thus long ago, but I feared that without her to aid us the Xotalancas would overcome us. She needed my help, too; that's the only reason she let me live this long. Now neither needs the other, and one must die. I swear that when we have slain the witch, you and Valeria shall go free without harm. My people will obey me when Tascela is

dead.'___Conan stooped and cut the ropes that held the prince, and Olmec slid cautiously from under the great ball and rose, shaking his head like a bull and muttering imprecations as he fingered his lacerated scalp. Standing shoulder to shoulder the two men presented a formidable picture of primitive power. Olmec was as tall as Conan, and heavier; but there was something repellent about the Tlazitlan, something abysmal and monstrous that contrasted unfavorably with the clean-cut, compact hardness of the Cimmerian. Conan had discarded the remnants of his tattered, blood-soaked shirt, and stood with his remarkable muscular development impressively revealed. His great shoulders were as broad as those of Olmec, and more cleanly outlined, and his huge breast arched with a more impressive sweep to a hard waist that lacked the paunchy thickness of Olmec's midsection. He might have been an image of primal strength cut out of bronze. Olmec was darker, but not from the burning of the sun. If Conan was a figure out of the dawn of Time, Olmec was a shambling, somber shape from the darkness of Time's pre-dawn.'___'Lead on,' demanded Conan. 'And keep ahead of me. I don't trust you any farther than I can throw a bull by the tail.'___Olmec turned and stalked on ahead of him, one hand twitching slightly as it plucked at his matted beard.'___Olmec did not lead Conan back to the bronze door, which the prince naturally supposed Tascela had locked, but to a certain chamber on the border of Tecuhtli.'___'This secret has been guarded for half a century,' he said. 'Not even our own clan knew of it, and the Xotalancas never learned. Tecuhtli himself built this secret entrance, afterward slaying the slaves who did the work; for he feared that he might find himself locked out of his own kingdom some day because of the spite of Tascela, whose passion for him soon changed to hate. But she discovered the secret, and barred the hidden door against him one day as he fled back from an unsuccessful raid, and the Xotalancas took him and flayed him. But once, spying upon her, I saw her enter Tecuhtli by this route, and so learned the secret.'___He pressed upon a gold ornament in the wall, and a panel swung inward, disclosing an ivory stair leading upward.'___'This stair is built within the wall,' said Olmec. 'It leads up to a tower upon the roof, and thence other stairs wind down to the various chambers. Hasten!'___'After you, comrade!' retorted Conan satirically, swaying his broadsword as he spoke, and Olmec shrugged his shoulders and stepped onto the staircase. Conan instantly followed him, and the door shut behind them. Far above a cluster of fire-jewels made the staircase a well of dusky dragon-light.'___They mounted until Conan estimated that they were above the level of the fourth floor, and then came out into a cylindrical tower, in the domed roof of which was set the bunch of fire-jewels that lighted the stair. Through gold-barred windows, set with unbreakable crystal panes, the first windows he had seen in Xuchotl, Conan got a glimpse of high ridges, domes and more towers, looming darkly against the stars. He was looking across the roofs of Xuchotl.'___Olmec did not look through the windows. He hurried down one of the several stairs that wound down from the tower, and when they had descended a few feet, this stair changed into a narrow corridor that wound tortuously on for some distance. It ceased at a steep flight of steps leading downward. There Olmec paused.'___Up from below, muffled, but unmistakable, welled a woman's scream, edged with fright, fury and shame. And Conan recognized Valeria's voice.'___In the swift rage roused by that cry, and the amazement of wondering what peril could wring such a shriek from Valeria's reckless lips, Conan forgot Olmec. He pushed past the prince and started down the stair. Awakening instinct brought him about again, just as Olmec struck with

his great mallet-like fist. The blow, fierce and silent, was aimed at the base of Conan's brain. But the Cimmerian wheeled in time to receive the buffet on the side of his neck instead. The impact would have snapped the vertebrae of a lesser man. As it was, Conan swayed backward, but even as he reeled he dropped his sword, useless at such close quarters, and grasped Olmec's extended arm, dragging the prince with him as he fell. Headlong they went down the steps together, in a revolving whirl of limbs and heads and bodies. And as they went Conan's iron fingers found and locked in Olmec's bull-throat. The barbarian's neck and shoulder felt numb from the sledge-like impact of Olmec's huge fist, which had carried all the strength of the massive forearm, thick triceps and great shoulder. But this did not affect his ferocity to any appreciable extent. Like a bulldog he hung on grimly, shaken and battered and beaten against the steps as they rolled, until at last they struck an ivory panel-door at the bottom with such an impact that they splintered it its full length and crashed through its ruins. But Olmec was already dead, for those iron fingers had crushed out his life and broken his neck as they fell. Conan rose, shaking the splinters from his great shoulder, blinking blood and dust out of his eyes. He was in the great throneroom. There were fifteen people in that room besides himself. The first person he saw was Valeria. A curious black altar stood before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candlesticks sent up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals united in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lay Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She was not bound. She lay at full length, her arms stretched out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar knelt a young man, holding her wrists firmly. A young woman knelt at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she could neither rise nor move. Eleven men and women of Tecuhtli knelt dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes. On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolled. Bronze bowls of incense rolled their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curled about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She could not sit still; she squirmed and shifted about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh. The crash of the door as it broke beneath the impact of the hurtling bodies caused no change in the scene. The kneeling men and women merely glanced incuriously at the corpse of their prince and at the man who rose from the ruins of the door, then swung their eyes greedily back to the writhing white shape on the black altar. Tascela looked insolently at him, and sprawled back on her seat, laughing mockingly. 'Slut!' Conan saw red. His hands clenched into iron hammers as he started for her. With his first step something clanged loudly and steel bit savagely into his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, checked in his headlong stride. The jaws of an iron trap had closed on his leg, with teeth that sank deep and held. Only the ridged muscles of his calf saved the bone from being splintered. The accursed thing had sprung out of the smoldering floor without warning. He saw the slots now, in the floor where the jaws had lain, perfectly camouflaged. 'Fool!' laughed Tascela. 'Did you think I would not guard against your possible return? Every door in this chamber is guarded by such traps. Stand there and watch now, while I fulfill the destiny of your handsome friend! Then I will decide your own.' Conan's hand instinctively sought his belt, only to encounter an empty scabbard. His sword was on the stair behind him. His poniard was lying back in the forest, where the dragon had

torn it from his jaw. The steel teeth in his leg were like burning coals, but the pain was not as savage as the fury that seethed in his soul. He was trapped, like a wolf. If he had had his sword he would have hewn off his leg and crawled across the floor to slay Tascela. Valeria's eyes rolled toward him with mute appeal, and his own helplessness sent red waves of madness surging through his brain. ___ Dropping on the knee of his free leg, he strove to get his fingers between the jaws of the trap, to tear them apart by sheer strength. Blood started from beneath his finger nails, but the jaws fitted close about his leg in a circle whose segments jointed perfectly, contracted until there was no space between his mangled flesh and the fanged iron. The sight of Valeria's naked body added flame to the fire of his rage. ___ Tascela ignored him. Rising languidly from her seat she swept the ranks of her subjects with a searching glance, and asked: 'Where are Xamec, Zlanath and Tachic?' ___ 'They did not return from the catacombs, princess,' answered a man. 'Like the rest of us, they bore the bodies of the slain into the crypts, but they have not returned. Perhaps the ghost of Tolkemec took them.' ___ 'Be silent, fool!' she ordered harshly. 'The ghost is a myth.' ___ She came down from her dais, playing with a thin gold-hiked dagger. Her eyes burned like nothing on the hither side of hell. She paused beside the altar and spoke in the tense stillness. ___ 'Your life shall make me young, white woman!' she said. 'I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over yours, and slowly - ah, slowly! - sink this blade through your heart, so that your life, fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine, making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!' ___ Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bent down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stared up into her glowing dark eyes - eyes that grew larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke. ___ The kneeling people gripped their hands and held their breath, tense for the bloody climax, and the only sound was Conan's fierce panting as he strove to tear his leg from the trap. ___ All eyes were glued to the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it was only a low cry that shattered the fixity of the scene and brought all whirling about - a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp. They looked, and they saw. ___ Framed in the door to the left of the dais stood a nightmare figure. It was a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that fell over his breast. Rags only partly covered his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin was not like that of a normal human. There was a suggestion of scaliness about it, as if the owner had dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there was nothing at all human about the eyes that blazed from the tangle of white hair. They were great gleaming disks that stared unwinkingly, luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gaped, but no coherent words issued - only a high-pitched tittering. ___ 'Tolkemec!' whispered Tascela, livid, while the others crouched in speechless horror. 'No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night? I see now why Xamec and Zlanath and Tachic did not return from the catacombs - and never will return. But why have you waited so long to strike? Were you seeking something, in the pits? Some secret weapon you knew was hidden there? And have you

found it at last?'___That hideous tittering was Tolkemec's only reply, as he bounded into the room with a long leap that carried him over the secret trap before the door - by chance, or by some faint recollection of the ways of Xuchotl. He was not mad, as a man is mad. He had dwelt apart from humanity so long that he was no longer human. Only an unbroken thread of memory embodied in hate and the urge for vengeance had connected him with the humanity from which he had been cut off, and held him lurking near the people he hated. Only that thin string had kept him from racing and prancing off for ever into the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world he had discovered, long ago. ___'You sought something hidden!' whispered Tascela, cringing back. 'And you have found it! You remember the feud! After all these years of blackness, you remember!'___For in the lean hand of Tolkemec now waved a curious jade-hued wand, on the end of which glowed a knob of crimson shaped like a pomegranate. She sprang aside as he thrust it out like a spear, and a beam of crimson fire lanced from the pomegranate. It missed Tascela, but the woman holding Valeria's ankles was in the way. It smote between her shoulders. There was a sharp crackling sound and the ray of fire flashed from her bosom and struck the black altar, with a snapping of blue sparks. The woman toppled sidewise, shriveling and withering like a mummy even as she fell. ___Valeria rolled from the altar on the other side, and started for the opposite wall on all fours. For hell had burst loose in the throneroom of dead Olmec. ___The man who had held Valeria's hands was the next to die. He turned to run, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Tolkemec, with an agility appalling in such a frame, bounded around to a position that placed the man between him and the altar. Again the red fire-beam flashed and the Tecuhltli rolled lifeless to the floor as the beam completed its course with a burst of blue sparks against the altar. ___Then began slaughter. Screaming insanely the people rushed about the chamber, caroming from one another, stumbling and falling. And among them Tolkemec capered and pranced, dealing death. They could not escape by the doors; for apparently the metal of the portals served like the metal-veined stone altar to complete the circuit for whatever hellish power flashed like thunderbolts from the witch-wand the ancient waved in his hand. When he caught a man or a woman between him and a door or the altar, that one died instantly. He chose no special victim. He took them as they came, with his rags flapping about his wildly gyrating limbs, and the gusty echoes of his tittering sweeping the room above the screams. And bodies fell like falling leaves about the altar and at the doors. One warrior in desperation rushed at him, lifting a dagger, only to fall before he could strike. But the rest were like crazed cattle, with no thought for resistance, and no chance of escape. ___The last Tecuhltli except Tascela had fallen when the princess reached the Cimmerian and the girl who had taken refuge beside him. Tascela bent and touched the floor, pressing a design upon it. Instantly the iron jaws released the bleeding limb and sank back into the floor. ___'Slay him if you can!' she panted, and pressed a heavy knife into his hand. 'I have no magic to withstand him!' ___With a grunt he sprang before the women, not heeding his lacerated leg in the heat of the fighting-lust. Tolkemec was coming toward him, his weird eyes ablaze, but he hesitated at the gleam of the knife in Conan's hand. Then began a grim game, as Tolkemec sought to circle about Conan and get the barbarian between him and the altar or a metal door, while Conan sought to avoid this and drive home his knife. The women watched tensely, holding their breath. ___There was no sound except the rustic and scrape of quick-shifting feet. Tolkemec pranced and capered no more. He realized that grimmer game confronted

him than the people who had died screaming and fleeing. In the elemental blaze of the barbarian's eyes he read an intent deadly as his own. Back and forth they weaved, and when one moved the other moved as if invisible threads bound them together. But all the time Conan was getting closer and closer to his enemy. Already the coiled muscles of his thighs were beginning to flex for a spring, when Valeria cried out. For a fleeting instant a bronze door was in line with Conan's moving body. The red line leaped, searing Conan's flank as he twisted aside, and even as he shifted he hurled the knife. Old Tolkemec went down, truly slain at last, the hilt vibrating on his breast. Tascela sprang - not toward Conan, but toward the wand where it shimmered like a live thing on the floor. But as she leaped, so did Valeria, with a dagger snatched from a dead man, and the blade, driven with all the power of the pirate's muscles, impaled the princess of Tecuhltli so that the point stood out between her breasts. Tascela screamed once and fell dead, and Valeria spurned the body with her heel as it fell. 'I had to do that much, for my own self-respect!' panted Valeria, facing Conan across the limp corpse. 'Well, this cleans up the feud,' he grunted. 'It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry.' 'You need a bandage on that leg,' Valeria ripped a length of silk from a hanging and knotted it about her waist, then tore off some smaller strips which she bound efficiently about the barbarian's lacerated limb. 'I can walk on it,' he assured her. 'Let's begone. It's dawn, outside this infernal city. I've had enough of Xuchotl. It's well the breed exterminated itself. I don't want any of their accursed jewels. They might be haunted.' 'There is enough clean loot in the world for you and me,' she said, straightening to stand tall and splendid before him. The old blaze came back in his eyes, and this time she did not resist as he caught her fiercely in his arms. 'It's a long way to the coast,' she said presently, withdrawing her lips from his. 'What matter?' he laughed. 'There's nothing we can't conquer. We'll have our feet on a ship's deck before the Stygians open their ports for the trading season. And then we'll show the world what plundering means!'

JEWELS OF
GWAHEUR Paths of Intrigue The cliffs rose sheer from the jungle, towering ramparts of stone that glinted jade-blue and dull crimson in the rising sun, and curved away and away to east and west above the waving emerald ocean of fronds and leaves. It looked insurmountable, that giant palisade with its sheer curtains of solid rock in which bits of quartz winked dazzlingly in the sunlight. But the man who was working his tedious way upward was already halfway to the top. He came of a race of hillmen, accustomed to scaling forbidding crags, and he was a man of unusual strength and agility. His only garment was a pair of short red silk breeks, and his sandals were slung to his back, out of his way, as were his sword and dagger. The man was powerfully built, supple as a panther. His skin was bronzed by the sun, his square-cut black mane confined by a silver band about his temples. His iron muscles, quick eyes and sure feet served him well here, for it was a climb to test these qualities to the utmost. A hundred and fifty feet below him waved the jungle. An equal distance above him the rim of the cliffs was etched against the morning sky. He labored like one driven by the necessity of haste; yet he was forced to move at a snail's pace, clinging like a fly on a wall. His groping hands and feet found niches and knobs, precarious holds at best, and sometimes he virtually hung by his finger nails. Yet upward he went, clawing, squirming, fighting for every foot. At times he paused to rest his aching muscles, and, shaking the sweat out of his

eyes, twisted his head to stare searchingly out over the jungle, combing the green expanse for any trace of human life or motion. Now the summit was not far above him, and he observed, only a few feet above his head, a break in the sheer stone of the cliff. An instant later he had reached it - a small cavern, just below the edge of the rim. As his head rose above the lip of its floor, he grunted. He clung there, his elbows hooked over the lip. The cave was so tiny that it was little more than a niche cut in the stone, but held an occupant. A shriveled mummy, cross-legged, arms folded on the withered breast upon which the shrunken head was sunk, sat in the little cavern. The limbs were bound in place with rawhide thongs which had become mere rotted wisps. If the form had ever been clothed, the ravages of time had long ago reduced the garments to dust. But thrust between the crossed arms and the shrunken breast there was a roll of parchment, yellowed with age to the color of old ivory. The climber stretched forth a long arm and wrenched away this cylinder. Without investigation he thrust it into his girdle and hauled himself up until he was standing in the opening of the niche. A spring upward and he caught the rim of the cliffs and pulled himself up and over almost with the same motion. There he halted, panting, and stared downward. It was like looking into the interior of a vast bowl, rimmed by a circular stone wall. The floor of the bowl was covered with trees and denser vegetation, though nowhere did the growth duplicate the jungle denseness of the outer forest. The cliffs marched around it without a break and of uniform height. It was a freak of nature, not to be paralleled, perhaps, in the whole world: a vast natural amphitheater, a circular bit of forested plain, three or four miles in diameter, cut off from the rest of the world, and confined within the ring of those palisaded cliffs. But the man on the cliffs did not devote his thoughts to marveling at the topographical phenomenon. With tense eagerness he searched the tree-tops below him, and exhaled a gusty sigh when he caught the glint of marble domes amidst the twinkling green. It was no myth, then; below him lay the fabulous and deserted palace of Alkmeenon. Conan the Cimmerian, late of the Baracha Isles, of the Black Coast, and of many other climes where life ran wild, had come to the kingdom of Keshan following the lure of a fabled treasure that outshone the hoard of the Turanian kings. Keshan was a barbaric kingdom lying in the eastern hinterlands of Kush where the broad grasslands merge with the forests that roll up from the south. The people were a mixed race, a dusky nobility ruling a population that was largely pure negro. The rulers - princes and high priests - claimed descent from a white race which, in a mythical age, had ruled a kingdom whose capital city was Alkmeenon. Conflicting legends sought to explain the reason for that race's eventual downfall, and the abandonment of the city by the survivors. Equally nebulous were the tales of the Teeth of Gwahlur, the treasure of Alkmeenon. But these misty legends had been enough to bring Conan to Keshan, over vast distances of plain, river-laced jungle, and mountains. He had found Keshan, which in itself was considered mythical by many northern and western nations, and he had heard enough to confirm the rumors of the treasure that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But its hiding-place he could not learn, and he was confronted with the necessity of explaining his presence in Keshan. Unattached strangers were not welcome there. But he was not nonplussed. With cool assurance he made his offer to the stately plumed, suspicious grandees of the barbarically magnificent court. He was a professional fighting-man. In search of employment (he said) he had come to Keshan. For a price he would train the armies of Keshan and

lead them against Punt, their hereditary enemy, whose recent successes in the field had aroused the fury of Keshan's irascible king. ___This proposition was not so audacious as it might seem. Conan's fame had preceded him, even into distant Keshan; his exploits as a chief of the black corsairs, those wolves of the southern coasts, had made his name known, admired and feared throughout the black kingdoms. He did not refuse tests devised by the dusky lords. Skirmishes along the borders were incessant, affording the Cimmerian plenty of opportunities to demonstrate his ability at hand-to-hand fighting. His reckless ferocity impressed the lords of Keshan, already aware of his reputation as a leader of men, and the prospects seemed favorable. All Conan secretly desired was employment to give him legitimate excuse for remaining in Keshan long enough to locate the hiding-place of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Then there came an interruption. Thutmekri came to Keshan at the head of an embassy from Zembabwei. ___Thutmekri was a Stygian, an adventurer and a rogue whose wits had recommended him to the twin kings of the great hybrid trading kingdom which lay many days' march to the east. He and the Cimmerian knew each other of old, and without love. Thutmekri likewise had a proposition to make to the king of Keshan, and it also concerned the conquest of Punt - which kingdom, incidentally, lying east of Keshan, had recently expelled the Zembabwan traders and burned their fortresses. ___His offer outweighed even the prestige of Conan. He pledged himself to invade Punt from the east with a host of black spearmen, Shemitish archers, and mercenary swordsmen, and to aid the king of Keshan to annex the hostile kingdom. The benevolent kings of Zembabwei desired only a monopoly of the trade of Keshan and her tributaries - and, as a pledge of good faith, some of the Teeth of Gwahlur. These would be put to no base usage. Thutmekri hastened to explain to the suspicious chieftains; they would be placed in the temple of Zembabwei beside the squat gold idols of Dagon and Derketo, sacred guests in the holy shrine of the kingdom, to seal the covenant between Keshan and Zembabwei. This statement brought a savage grin to Conan's hard lips. ___The Cimmerian made no attempt to match wits and intrigue with Thutmekri and his Shemitish partner, Zargheba. He knew that if Thutmekri won his point, he would insist on the instant banishment of his rival. There was but one thing for Conan to do: find the jewels before the king of Keshan made up his mind and flee with them. But by this time he was certain that they were not hidden in Keshia, the royal city which was a swarm of thatched huts crowding about a mud wall that enclosed a palace of stone and mud and bamboo. ___While he fumed with nervous impatience, the high priest Gorulga announced that before any decision could be reached, the will of the gods must be ascertained concerning the proposed alliance with Zembabwei and the pledge of objects long held holy and inviolate. The oracle of Alkmeenon must be consulted. ___This was an awesome thing, and it caused tongues to wag excitedly in palace and bee-hive hut. Not for a century had the priests visited the silent city. The oracle, men said, was the Princess Yelaya, the last ruler of Alkmeenon, who had died in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, and whose body had miraculously remained unblemished throughout the ages. Of old, priests had made their way into the haunted city, and she had taught them wisdom. The last priest to seek the oracle had been a wicked man, who had sought to steal for himself the curiously cut jewels that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But some doom had come upon him in the deserted palace, from which his acolytes, fleeing, had told tales of horror that had for a hundred years frightened the priests from the city and the oracle. ___But Gorulga, the present high priest, as one

confident in his knowledge of his own integrity, announced that he would go with a handful of followers to revive the ancient custom. And in the excitement tongues buzzed indiscreetly, and Conan caught the clue for which he had sought for weeks - the overheard whisper of a lesser priest that sent the Cimmerian stealing out of Keshia the night before the dawn when the priests were to start.____Riding as hard as he dared for a night and a day and a night, he came in the early dawn to the cliffs of Alkmeenon, which stood in the southwestern corner of the kingdom, amidst uninhabited jungle which was taboo to common men. None but the priests dared approach the haunted vale within a distance of many miles. And not even a priest had entered Alkmeenon for a hundred years.____No man had ever climbed these cliffs, legends said, and none but the priests knew the secret entrance into the valley. Conan did not waste time looking for it. Steeps that balked these people, horsemen and dwellers of plain and level forest, were not impossible for a man born in the rugged hills of Cimmeria. Now on the summit of the cliffs he looked down into the circular valley and wondered what plague, war or superstition had driven the members of that ancient race forth from their stronghold to mingle with and be absorbed by the tribes that hemmed them in.____This valley had been their citadel. There the palace stood, and there only the royal family and their court dwelt. The real city stood outside the cliffs. Those waving masses of green jungle vegetation hid its ruins. But the domes that glistened in the leaves below him were the unbroken pinnacles of the royal palace of Alkmeenon which had defied the corroding ages.____Swinging a leg over the rim he went down swiftly. The inner side of the cliffs was more broken, not quite so sheer. In less than half the time it had taken him to ascend the outer side, he dropped to the swarded valley floor.____With one hand on his sword, he looked alertly about him. There was no reason to suppose men lied when they said that Alkmeenon was empty and deserted, haunted only by the ghosts of the dead past. But it was Conan's nature to be suspicious and wary. The silence was primordial; not even a leaf quivered on a branch. When he bent to peer under the trees, he saw nothing but the marching rows of trunks, receding and receding into the blue gloom of the deep woods.____Nevertheless he went warily, sword in hand, his restless eyes combing the shadows from side to side, his springy tread making no sound on the sward. All about him he saw signs of an ancient civilization; marble fountains, voiceless and crumbling, stood in circles of slender trees whose patterns were too symmetrical to have been a chance of nature. Forest-growth and underbrush had invaded the evenly planned groves, but their outlines were still visible. Broad pavements ran away under the trees, broken, and with grass growing through the wide cracks. He glimpsed walls with ornamental copings, lattices of carven stone that might once have served as the walls of pleasure pavilions.____Ahead of him, through the trees, the domes gleamed and the bulk of the structure supporting them became more apparent as he advanced. Presently, pushing through a screen of vine-tangled branches, he came into a comparatively open space where the trees straggled, unencumbered by undergrowth, and saw before him the wide, pillared portico of the palace.____As he mounted the broad marble steps, he noted that the building was in far better state of preservation than the lesser structures he had glimpsed. The thick walls and massive pillars seemed too powerful to crumble before the assault of time and the elements. The same enchanted quiet brooded over all. The cat-like pad of his sandaled feet seemed startlingly loud in the stillness.____Somewhere in this palace lay the effigy or image which had in times past served as oracle for the priests of Keshan. And

somewhere in the palace, unless that indiscreet priest had babbled a lie, was hidden the treasure of the forgotten kings of Alkmeenon.____Conan passed into a broad, lofty hall, lined with tall columns, between which arches gaped, their door long rotted away. He traversed this in a twilight dimness, and at the other end passed through great double-valved bronze doors which stood partly open, as they might have stood for centuries. He emerged into a vast domed chamber which must have served as audience hall for the kings of Alkmeenon.____It was octagonal in shape, and the great dome up to which the lofty ceiling curved obviously was cunningly pierced, for the chamber was much better lighted than the hall which led to it. At the farther side of the great room there rose a dais with broad lapis-lazuli steps leading up to it, and on that dais there stood a massive chair with ornate arms and a high back which once doubtless supported a cloth-of-gold canopy. Conan grunted explosively and his eyes lit. The golden throne of Alkmeenon, named in immemorial legendry! He weighed it with a practised eye. It represented a fortune in itself, if he were but able to bear it away. Its richness fired his imagination concerning the treasure itself, and made him burn with eagerness. His fingers itched to plunge among the gems he had heard described by story-tellers in the market squares of Keshia, who repeated tales handed down from mouth to mouth through the centuries - jewels not to be duplicated in the world, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, bloodstones, opals, sapphires, the loot of the ancient world.____He had expected to find the oracle-effigy seated on the throne, but since it was not, it was probably placed in some other part of the palace, if, indeed, such a thing really existed. But since he had turned his face toward Keshan, so many myths had proved to be realities that he did not doubt that he would find some kind of image or god.____Behind the throne there was a narrow arched doorway which doubtless had been masked by hangings in the days of Alkmeenon's life. He glanced through it and saw that it led into an alcove, empty, and with a narrow corridor leading off from it at right angles. Turning away from it, he spied another arch to the left of the dais, and it, unlike the others, was furnished with a door. Nor was it any common door. The portal was of the same rich metal as the throne, and carved with many curious arabesques.____At his touch it swung open so readily that its hinges might recently have been oiled. Inside he halted, staring.____He was in a square chamber of no great dimensions, whose marble walls rose to an ornate ceiling, inlaid with gold. Gold friezes ran about the base and the top of the walls, and there was no door other than the one through which he had entered. But he noted these details mechanically. His whole attention was centered on the shape which lay on an ivory dais before him.____He had expected an image, probably carved with the skill of a forgotten art. But no art could mimic the perfection of the figure that lay before him.____It was no effigy of stone or metal or ivory. It was the actual body of a woman, and by what dark art the ancients had preserved that form unblemished for so many ages Conan could not even guess. The vague uneasiness she wore were intact - and Conan scowled at that, a vague uneasiness stirring at the back of his mind. The arts that preserved the body should not have affected the garments. Yet there they were - gold breast-plates set with concentric circles of small gems, gilded sandals, and a short silken skirt upheld by a jeweled girdle. Neither cloth nor metal showed any signs of decay.____Yelaya was coldly beautiful, even in death. Her body was like alabaster, slender yet voluptuous; a great crimson jewel gleamed against the darkly piled foam of her hair.____Conan stood frowning down at her, and then tapped the

dais with his sword. Possibilities of a hollow containing the treasure occurred to him, but the dais rang solid. He turned and paced the chamber in some indecision. Where should he search first, in the limited time at his disposal? The priest he had overheard babbling to a courtesan had said the treasure was hidden in the palace. But that included a space of considerable vastness. He wondered if he should hide himself until the priests had come and gone, and then renew the search. But there was a strong chance that they might take the jewels with them when they returned to Keshia. For he was convinced that Thutmekri had corrupted Gorulga. ___Conan could predict Thutmekri's plans from his knowledge of the man. He knew that it had been Thutmekri who had proposed the conquest of Punt to the kings of Zembabwei, which conquest was but one move toward their real goal - the capture of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Those wary kings would demand proof that the treasure really existed before they made any move. The jewels Thutmekri asked as a pledge would furnish that proof. ___With positive evidence of the treasure's reality, the kings of Zembabwei would move. Punt would be invaded simultaneously from the east and the west, but the Zembabwans would see to it that the Keshani did most of the fighting, and then, when both Punt and Keshan were exhausted from the struggle the Zembabwans would crush both races, loot Keshan and take the treasure by force, if they had to destroy every building and torture every living human in the kingdom. ___But there was always another possibility: if Thutmekri could get his hands on the hoard, it would be characteristic of the man to cheat his employers, steal the jewels for himself and decamp, leaving the Zembabwan emissaries holding the sack. ___Conan believed that this consulting of the oracle was but a ruse to persuade the king of Keshan to accede to Thutmekri's wishes - for he never for a moment doubted that Gorulga was as subtle and devious as all the rest mixed up in this grand swindle. Conan had not approached the high priest himself, because in the game of bribery he would have no chance against Thutmekri, and to attempt it would be to play directly into the Stygian's hands. Gorulga could denounce the Cimmerian to the people, establish a reputation for integrity, and rid Thutmekri of his rival at one stroke. He wondered how Thutmekri had corrupted the high priest, and just what could be offered as a bribe to a man who had the greatest treasure in the world under his fingers. ___At any rate he was sure that the oracle would be made to say that the gods willed it that Keshan should follow Thutmekri's wishes, and he was sure, too, that it would drop a few pointed remarks concerning himself. After that Keshia would be too hot for the Cimmerian, nor had Conan had any intention of returning when he rode away in the night. ___The oracle chamber held no clue for him. He went forth into the great throne-room and laid his hands on the throne. It was heavy, but he could tilt it up. The floor beneath, a thick marble dais, was solid. Again he sought the alcove. His mind clung to a secret crypt near the oracle. Painstakingly he began to tap along the walls, and presently his taps rang hollow at a spot opposite the mouth of the narrow corridor. Looking more closely he saw that the crack between the marble panel at that point and the next was wider than usual. He inserted a dagger-point and pried. ___Silently the panel swung open, revealing a niche in the wall, but nothing else. He swore feelingly. The aperture was empty, and it did not look as if it had ever served as a crypt for treasure. Leaning into the niche he saw a system of tiny holes in the wall, about on a level with a man's mouth. He peered through, and grunted understandingly. That was the wall that formed the partition between the alcove and the oracle chamber. Those holes had not been visible in the chamber. Conan

grinned. This explained the mystery of the oracle, but it was a bit cruder than he had expected. Gorulga would plant either himself or some trusted minion in that niche, to talk through the holes, and the credulous acolytes would accept it as the veritable voice of Yelaya. Remembering something, the Cimmerian drew forth the roll of parchment he had taken from the mummy and unrolled it carefully, as it seemed ready to fall to pieces with age. He scowled over the dim characters with which it was covered. In his roaming about the world the giant adventurer had picked up a wide smattering of knowledge, particularly including the speaking and reading of many alien tongues. Many a sheltered scholar would have been astonished at the Cimmerian's linguistic abilities, for he had experienced many adventures where knowledge of a strange language had meant the difference between life and death. These characters were puzzling, at once familiar and unintelligible, and presently he discovered the reason. They were the characters of archaic Pelishtim, which possessed many points of difference from the modern script, with which he was familiar, and which, three centuries ago, had been modified by conquest by a nomad tribe. This older, purer script baffled him. He made out a recurrent phrase, however, which he recognized as a proper name: Bit Yakin. He gathered that it was the name of the writer. Scowling, his lips unconsciously moving as he struggled with the task, he blundered through the manuscript, finding much of it untranslatable and most of the rest of it obscure. He gathered that the writer, the mysterious Bit Yakin, had come from afar with his servants, and entered the valley of Alkmeenon. Much that followed was meaningless, interspersed as it was with unfamiliar phrases and characters. Such as he could translate seemed to indicate the passing of a very long period of time. The name of Yelaya was repeated frequently, and toward the last part of the manuscript it became apparent that Bit Yakin knew that death was upon him. With a slight start Conan realized that the mummy in the cavern must be the remains of the writer of the manuscript, the mysterious Pelishtim, Bit Yakin. The man had died, as he had prophesied, and his servants, obviously, had placed him in that open crypt, high up on the cliffs, according to his instructions before his death. It was strange that Bit Yakin was not mentioned in any of the legends of Alkmeenon. Obviously he had come to the valley after it had been deserted by the original inhabitants - the manuscript indicated as much - but it seemed peculiar that the priests who came in the old days to consult the oracle had not seen the man or his servants. Conan felt sure that the mummy and this parchment were more than a hundred years old. Bit Yakin had dwelt in the valley when the priests came of old to bow before dead Yelaya. Yet concerning him the legends were silent, telling only of a deserted city, haunted only by the dead. Why had the man dwelt in this desolate spot, and to what unknown destination had his servants departed after disposing of their master's corpse? Conan shrugged his shoulders and thrust the parchment back into his girdle - he started violently, the skin on the backs of his hands tingling. Startlingly, shockingly in the slumberous stillness, there had boomed the deep strident clangor of a great gong! He wheeled, crouching like a great cat, sword in hand, glaring down the narrow corridor from which the sound had seemed to come. Had the priests of Keshia arrived? This was improbable, he knew; they would not have had time to reach the valley. But that gong was indisputable evidence of human presence. Conan was basically a direct-actionist. Such subtlety as he possessed had been acquired through contact with the more devious races. When taken off guard by some unexpected

occurrence, he reverted instinctively to type. So now, instead of hiding or slipping away in the opposite direction as the average man might have done, he ran straight down the corridor in the direction of the sound. His sandals made no more sound than the pads of a panther would have made; his eyes were slits, his lips unconsciously asnarl. Panic had momentarily touched his soul at the shock of that unexpected reverberation, and the red rage of the primitive that is wakened by threat of peril always lurked close to the surface of the Cimmerian.____He emerged presently from the winding corridor into a small open court. Something glinting in the sun caught his eye. It was the gong, a great gold disk, hanging from a gold arm extending from the crumbling wall. A brass mallet lay near, but there was no sound or sight of humanity. The surrounding arches gaped emptily. Conan crouched inside the doorway for what seemed a long time. There was no sound or movement throughout the great palace. His patience exhausted at last, he glided around the curve of the court, peering into the arches, ready to leap either way like a flash of light, or to strike right or left as a cobra strikes.____He reached the gong, stared into the arch nearest it. He saw only a dim chamber, littered with the debris of decay. Beneath the gong the polished marble flags showed no footprints, but there was a scent in the air - a faintly fetid odor he could not classify; his nostrils dilated like those of a wild beast as he sought in vain to identify it.____He turned toward the arch - with appalling suddenness the seemingly solid flags splintered and gave way under his feet. Even as he fell he spread wide his arms and caught the edges of the aperture that gaped beneath him. The edges crumbled off under his clutching fingers. Down into utter darkness he shot, into black icy water that gripped him and whirled him away with breathless speed._____A Goddess Awakens_____The Cimmerian at first made no attempt to fight the current that was sweeping him through lightless night. He kept himself afloat, gripping between his teeth the sword, which he had not relinquished, even in his fall, and did not even seek to guess to what doom he was being borne. But suddenly a beam of light lanced the darkness ahead of him. He saw the surging, seething black surface of the water, in turmoil as if disturbed by some monster of the deep, and he saw the sheer stone walls of the channel curved up to a vault overhead. On each side ran a narrow ledge, just below the arching roof, but they were far out of his reach. At one point this roof had been broken, probably fallen in, and the light was streaming through the aperture. Beyond that shaft of light was utter blackness, and panic assailed the Cimmerian as he saw he would be swept on past that spot of light, and into the unknown blackness again.____Then he saw something else: bronze ladders extended from the ledges to the water's surface at regular intervals, and there was one just ahead of him. Instantly he struck out for it, fighting the current that would have held him to the middle of the stream. It dragged at him as with tangible, animate slimy hands, but he buffeted the rushing surge with the strength of desperation and now drew closer and closer inshore, fighting furiously for every inch. Now he was even with the ladder and with a fierce, gasping plunge he gripped the bottom rung and hung on, breathless.____A few seconds later he struggled up out of the seething water, trusting his weight dubiously to the corroded rungs. They sagged and bent, but they held, and he clambered up onto the narrow ledge which ran along the wall scarcely a man's length below the curving roof. The tall Cimmerian was forced to bend his head as he stood up. A heavy bronze door showed in the stone at a point even with the head of the ladder, but it did not give to Conan's efforts. He transferred his sword from

his teeth to its scabbard, spitting blood - for the edge had cut his lips in that fierce fight with the river - and turned his attention to the broken roof. ___He could reach his arms up through the crevice and grip the edge, and careful testing told him it would bear his weight. An instant later he had drawn himself up through the hole, and found himself in a wide chamber, in a state of extreme disrepair. Most of the roof had fallen in, as well as a great section of the floor, which was laid over the vault of a subterranean river. Broken arches opened into other chambers and corridors, and Conan believed he was still in the great palace. He wondered uneasily how many chambers in that palace had underground water directly under them, and when the ancient flags or tiles might give way again and precipitate him back into the current from which he had just crawled. ___And he wondered just how much of an accident that fall had been. Had those rotten flags simply chanced to give way beneath his weight, or was there a more sinister explanation? One thing at least was obvious: he was not the only living thing in that palace. That gong had not sounded of its own accord, whether the noise had been meant to lure him to his death, or not. The silence of the palace became suddenly sinister, fraught with crawling menace. ___Could it be someone on the same mission as himself? A sudden thought occurred to him, at the memory of the mysterious Bit-Yakin. Was it not possible that this man had found the Teeth of Gwahlur in his long residence in Alkmeenon ? that his servants had taken them with them when they departed? The possibility that he might be following a will-o'-the-wisp infuriated the Cimmerian. ___Choosing a corridor which he believed led back toward the part of the palace he had first entered, he hurried along it, stepping gingerly as he thought of that black river that seethed and foamed somewhere below his feet. ___His speculations recurrently revolved about the oracle chamber and its cryptic occupant. Somewhere in that vicinity must be the clue to the mystery of the treasure, if indeed it still remained in its immemorial hiding-place. ___The great palace lay silent as ever, disturbed only by the swift passing of his sandaled feet. The chambers and halls he traversed were crumbling into ruin, but as he advanced the ravages of decay became less apparent. He wondered briefly for what purpose the ladders had been suspended from the ledges over the subterranean river, but dismissed the matter with a shrug. He was little interested in speculating over unremunerative problems of antiquity. ___He was not sure just where the oracle chamber lay, from where he was, but presently he emerged into a corridor which led back into the great throne-room under one of the arches. He had reached a decision; it was useless for him to wander aimlessly about the palace, seeking the hoard. He would conceal himself somewhere here, wait until the Keshani priests came, and then, after they had gone through the farce of consulting the oracle, he would follow them to the hiding-place of the gems, to which he was certain they would go. Perhaps they would take only a few of the jewels with them. He would content himself with the rest. ___Drawn by a morbid fascination, he re-entered the oracle chamber and stared down again at the motionless figure of the princess who was worshipped as a goddess, entranced by her frigid beauty. What cryptic secret was locked in that marvelously molded form? ___He started violently. The breath sucked through his teeth, the short hairs prickled at the back of his scalp. The body still lay as he had first seen it, silent, motionless, in breast-plates of jeweled gold, gilded sandals and silken shirt. But now there was a subtle difference. The lissom limbs were not rigid, a peach-bloom touched the cheeks, the lips were red? ___With a panicky curse Conan ripped out his sword. ___'Crom!

She's alive!"___At his words the long dark lashes lifted; the eyes opened and gaped up at him inscrutably, dark, lustrous, mystical. He glared in frozen speechlessness.___She sat up with a supple ease, still holding his ensorcelled stare.___He licked his dry lips and found voice.___'You - are - are you Yelaya?' he stammered.___'I am Yelaya!' The voice was rich and musical, and he stared with new wonder. 'Do not fear. I will not harm you if you do my bidding.'___'How can a dead woman come to life after all these centuries?' he demanded, as if skeptical of what his senses told him. A curious gleam was beginning to smolder in his eyes.___She lifted her arms in a mystical gesture.___'I am a goddess. A thousand years ago there descended upon me the curse of the greater gods, the gods of darkness beyond the borders of light. The mortal in me died; the goddess in me could never die. Here I have lain for so many centuries, to awaken each night at sunset and hold my court as of yore, with specters drawn from the shadows of the past. Man, if you would not view that which will blast your soul for ever, get hence quickly! I command you! Go!' The voice became imperious, and her slender arm lifted and pointed.___Conan, his eyes burning slits, slowly sheathed his sword, but he did not obey her order. He stepped closer, as if impelled by a powerful fascination - without the slightest warning he grabbed her up in a bear-like grasp. She screamed a very ungoddess-like scream, and there was a sound of ripping silk, as with one ruthless wrench he tore off her skirt.___'Goddess! Ha!' His bark was full of angry contempt. He ignored the frantic writhings of his captive. 'I thought it was strange that a princess of Alkmeenon would speak with a Corinthian accent! As soon as I'd gathered my wits I knew I'd seen you somewhere. You're Muriela, Zargheba's Corinthian dancing-girl. This crescent-shaped birthmark on your hip proves it. I saw it once when Zargheba was whipping you. Goddess! Bah!' He smacked the betraying hip contemptuously and resoundingly with his open hand, and the girl yelped piteously.___All her imperiousness had gone out of her. She was no longer a mystical figure of antiquity, but a terrified and humiliated dancing-girl, such as can be bought at almost any Shemitish market-place. She lifted up her voice and wept unashamedly. Her captor glared down at her with angry triumph.___'Goddess! Ha! So you were one of the veiled women Zargheba brought to Keshia with him. Did you think you could fool me, you little idiot? A year ago I saw you in Akbitana with that swine, Zargheba, and I don't forget faces - or women's figures. I think I'll?'___Squirming about in his grasp she threw her slender arms about his massive neck in an abandon of terror; tears coursed down her cheeks, and her sobs quivered with a note of hysteria.___'Oh, please don't hurt me! Don't! I had to do it! Zargheba brought me here to act as the oracle!''___'Why, you sacrilegious little hussy!' rumbled Conan. 'Do you not fear the gods? Crom! is there no honesty anywhere?'___'Oh, please!' she begged, quivering with abject fright. 'I couldn't disobey Zargheba. Oh, what shall I do? I shall be cursed by these heathen gods!''___'What do you think the priests will do to you if they find out you're an impostor?' he demanded.___At the thought her legs refused to support her, and she collapsed in a shuddering heap, clasping Conan's knees and mingling incoherent pleas for mercy and protection with piteous protestations of her innocence of any malign intention. It was a vivid change from her pose as the ancient princess, but not surprising. The fear that had nerved her then was now her undoing.___'Where is Zargheba?' he demanded. 'Stop yammering, damn it, and answer me.'___'Outside the palace,' she whimpered, 'watching for the priests.'___'How many men with him?' 'None. We came alone.'___'Ha!' It was much like the satisfied grunt of

a hunting lion. 'You must have left Keshia a few hours after I did. Did you climb the cliffs?'___She shook her head, too choked with tears to speak coherently. With an impatient imprecation he seized her slim shoulders and shook her until she gasped for breath. ___'Will you quit that blubbing and answer me? How did you get into the valley?'___'Zargheba knew the secret way,' she gasped. 'The priest Gwarunga told him, and Thutmekri. On the south side of the valley there is a broad pool lying at the foot of the cliffs. There is a cave-mouth under the surface of the water that is not visible to the casual glance. We ducked under the water and entered it. The cave slopes up out of the water swiftly and leads through the cliffs. The opening on the side of the valley is masked by heavy thickets.'___'I climbed the cliffs on the east side,' he muttered. 'Well, what then?'___'We came to the palace and Zargheba hid me among the trees while he went to look for the chamber of the oracle. I do not think he fully trusted Gwarunga. While he was gone I thought I heard a gong sound, but I was not sure. Presently Zargheba came and took me into the palace and brought me to this chamber, where the goddess Yelaya lay upon the dais. He stripped the body and clothed me in the garments and ornaments. Then he went forth to hide the body and watch for the priests. I have been afraid. When you entered I wanted to leap up and beg you to take me away from this place, but I feared Zargheba. When you discovered I was alive, I thought I could frighten you away.'___'What were you to say as the oracle?' he asked. ___'I was to bid the priests to take the Teeth of Gwahlur and give some of them to Thutmekri as a pledge, as he desired, and place the rest in the palace at Keshia. I was to tell them that an awful doom threatened Keshan if they did not agree to Thut-mekri's proposals. And, oh, yes, I was to tell them that you were to be skinned alive immediately.'___'Thutmekri wanted the treasure where he - or the Zembabwans - could lay hand on it easily,' muttered Conan, disregarding the remark concerning himself. 'I'll carve his liver yet - Gorulga is a party to this swindle, of course?'___'No. He believes in his gods, and is incorruptible. He knows nothing about this. He will obey the oracle. It was all Thut-mekri's plan. Knowing the Keshani would consult the oracle, he had Zargheba bring me with the embassy from Zembabwei, closely veiled and secluded.'___'Well, I'm damned!' muttered Conan. 'A priest who honestly believes in his oracle, and can not be bribed. Crom! I wonder if it was Zargheba who banged that gong. Did he know I was here? Could he have known about that rotten flagging? Where is he now, girl?'___'Hiding in a thicket of lotus trees, near the ancient avenue that leads from the south wall of the cliffs to the palace,' she answered. Then she renewed her importunities. 'Oh, Conan, have pity on me! I am afraid of this evil, ancient place. I know I have heard stealthy footfalls padding about me - oh, Conan, take me away with you! Zargheba will kill me when I have served his purpose here - I know it! The priests, too, will kill me if they discover my deceit.'___'He is a devil - he bought me from a slave-trader who stole me out of a caravan bound through southern Koth, and has made me the tool of his intrigues ever since. Take me away from him! You can not be as cruel as he. Don't leave me to be slain here! Please! Please!'___She was on her knees, clutching at Conan hysterically, her beautiful tear-stained face upturned to him, her dark silken hair flowing in disorder over her white shoulders. Conan picked her up and set her on his knee. ___'Listen to me. I'll protect you from Zargheba. The priests shall not know of your perfidy. But you've got to do as I tell you.'___She faltered promises of explicit obedience, clasping his corded neck as if seeking security from the contact. ___'Good. When the priests come, you'll act

the part of Yelaya, as Zargheba planned - it'll be dark, and in the torchlight they'll never know the difference. But you'll say this to them: "It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan. They are thieves and traitors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods." ___She shivered, with an expression of desperation, but acquiesced. ___'But Zargheba?' she cried. 'He'll kill me!' ___'Don't worry about Zargheba,' he grunted. 'I'll take care of that dog. You do as I say. Here, put up your hair again. It's fallen all over your shoulders. And the gem's fallen out of it.' ___He replaced the great glowing gem himself, nodding approval. ___'It's worth a room full of slaves, itself alone. Here, put your skirt back on. It's torn down the side, but the priests will never notice it. Wipe your face. A goddess doesn't cry like a whipped schoolgirl. By Crom, you do look like Yelaya, face, hair, figure and all! If you act the goddess with the priests as well as you did with me, you'll fool them easily.' ___'I'll try,' she shivered. ___'Good; I'm going to find Zargheba.' ___At that she became panicky again. ___'No! Don't leave me alone! This place is haunted!' ___'There's nothing here to harm you,' he assured her impatiently. 'Nothing but Zargheba, and I'm going to look after him. I'll be back shortly. I'll be watching from close by in case anything goes wrong during the ceremony; but if you play your part properly, nothing will go wrong.' ___And turning, he hastened out of the oracle chamber; behind him Muriela squeaked wretchedly at his going. ___Twilight had fallen. The great rooms and halls were shadowy and indistinct; copper friezes glinted dully through the dusk. Conan strode like a silent phantom through the great halls, with a sensation of being stared at from the shadowed recesses by invisible ghosts of the past. No wonder the girl was nervous amid such surroundings. ___He glided down the marble steps like a slinking panther, sword in hand. Silence reigned over the valley, and above the rim of the cliffs stars were blinking out. If the priests of Keshia had entered the valley there was not a sound, not a movement in the greenery to betray them. He made out the ancient broken-paved avenue, wandering away to the south, lost amid clustering masses of fronds and thick-leaved bushes. He followed it warily, hugging the edge of the paving where the shrubs massed their shadows thickly, until he saw ahead of him, dimly in the dusk, the clump of lotus-trees, the strange growth peculiar to the black lands of Kush. There, according to the girl, Zargheba should be lurking. Conan became stealth personified. A velvet-footed shadow, he melted into the thickets. ___He approached the lotus grove by a circuitous movement, and scarcely the rustle of a leaf proclaimed his passing. At the edge of the trees he halted suddenly, crouched like a suspicious panther among the deep shrubs. Ahead of him, among the dense leaves, showed a pallid oval, dim in the uncertain light. It might have been one of the great white blossoms which shone thickly among the branches. But Conan knew that it was a man's face. And it was turned toward him. He shrank quickly deeper into the shadows. Had Zargheba seen him. The man was looking directly toward him. Seconds passed. That dim face had not moved. Conan could make out the dark tuft below that was the short black beard. ___And suddenly Conan was aware of something unnatural. Zargheba, he knew, was not a tall man. Standing erect, his head would scarcely top the Cimmerian's shoulder; yet that face was on a level with Conan's own. Was the man standing on something? Conan bent and peered toward the ground below the spot where the face showed, but his vision was blocked by undergrowth and the thick boles of the trees.

But he saw something else, and he stiffened. Through a slot in the underbrush he glimpsed the stem of the tree under which, apparently, Zargheba was standing. The face was directly in line with that tree. He should have seen below that face, not the tree-trunk, but Zargheba's body - but there was no body there.____Suddenly tenser than a tiger who stalks his prey, Conan glided deeper into the thicket, and a moment later drew aside a leafy branch and glared at the face that had not moved. Nor would it ever move again, of its own volition. He looked on Zargheba's severed head, suspended from the branch of the tree by its own long black hair._____The Return of the Oracle____Conan wheeled supplely, sweeping the shadows with a fiercely questing stare. There was no sign of the murdered man's body; only yonder the tall lush grass was trampled and broken down and the sword was dabbled darkly and wetly. Conan stood scarcely breathing as he strained his ears into the silence. The trees and bushes with their great pallid blossoms stood dark, still and sinister, etched against the deepening dusk.____Primitive fears whispered at the back of Conan's mind. Was this the work of the priests of Keshan? If so, where were they? Was it Zargheba, after all, who had struck the gong? Again there rose the memory of Bit-Yakin and his mysterious servants. Bit-Yakin was dead, shriveled to a hulk of wrinkled leather and bound in his hollowed crypt to greet the rising sun for ever. But the servants of Bit-Yakin were unaccounted for. There "was no proof they had ever left the valley.____Conan thought of the girl, Muriela, alone and unguarded in that great shadowy palace. He wheeled and ran back down the shadowed avenue, and he ran as a suspicious panther runs, poised even in full stride to whirl right or left and strike death blows.____The palace loomed through the trees, and he saw something else - the glow of fire reflecting redly from the polished marble. He melted into the bushes that lined the broken street, glided through the dense growth and reached the edge of the open space before the portico. Voices reached him; torches bobbed and their flare shone on glossy ebon shoulders. The priests of Keshan had come.____They had not advanced up the wide, overgrown avenue as Zargheba had expected them to do. Obviously there was more than one secret way into the valley of Alkmeenon.____They were filing up the broad marble steps, holding their torches high. He saw Gorulga at the head of the parade, a profile chiseled out of copper, etched in the torch glare. The rest were acolytes, giant black men from whose skins the torches struck highlights. At the end of the procession there stalked a huge negro with an unusually wicked cast of countenance, at the sight of whom Conan scowled. That was Gwarunga, whom Muriela had named as the man who had revealed the secret of the pool-entrance to Zargheba. Conan wondered how deeply the man was in the intrigues of the Stygian.____He hurried toward the portico, circling the open space to keep in the fringing shadows. They left no one to guard the entrance. The torches streamed steadily down the long dark hall. Before they reached the double-valved door at the other end, Conan had mounted the other steps and was in the hall behind them. Slinking swiftly along the column-lined wall, he reached the great door as they crossed the huge throne-room, their torches driving back the shadows. They did not look back. In single file, their ostrich plumes nodding, their leopardskin tunics contrasting curiously with the marble and arabesqued metal of the ancient palace, they moved across the wide room and halted momentarily at the golden door to the left of the throne-dais.____Gorulga's voice boomed eerily and hollowly in the great empty space, framed in sonorous phrases unintelligible to the lurking listener; then the high priest thrust open the golden door and entered,

bowing repeatedly from his waist, and behind him the torches sank and rose, showering flakes of flame, as the worshippers imitated their master. The gold door closed behind them, shutting out sound and sight, and Conan darted across the throne-chamber and into the alcove behind the throne. He made less sound than a wind blowing across the chamber. ___Tiny beams of light streamed through the apertures in the wall, as he pried open the secret panel. Gliding into the niche, he peered through, Muriela sat upright on the dais, her arms folded, her head leaning back against the wall, within a few inches of his eyes. The delicate perfume of her foamy hair was in his nostrils. He could not see her face, of course, but her attitude was as if she gazed tranquilly into some far gulf of space, over and beyond the shaven heads of the black giants who knelt before her. Conan grinned with appreciation. 'The little slut's an actress,' he told himself. He knew she was shriveling with terror, but she showed no sign. In the uncertain flare of the torches she looked exactly like the goddess he had seen lying on that same dais, if one could imagine that goddess imbued with vibrant life. ___Gorulga was booming forth some kind of a chant in an accent unfamiliar to Conan, and which was probably some invocation in the ancient tongue of Alkmeenon, handed down from generation to generation of high priests. It seemed interminable. Conan grew restless. The longer the thing lasted, the more terrific would be the strain on Muriela. If she snapped - he hitched his sword and dagger forward. He could not see the little trollop tortured and slain by these men. ___But the chant - deep, low-pitched and indescribably ominous - came to a conclusion at last, and a shouted acclaim from the acolytes marked its period. Lifting his head and raising his arms toward the silent form on the dais, Gorulga cried in the deep, rich resonance that was the natural attribute of the Keshani priest: 'Oh, great goddess, dweller with the great one of darkness, let thy heart be melted, thy lips opened for the ears of thy slave whose head is in the dust beneath thy feet! Speak, great goddess of the holy valley! Thou knowest the paths before us; the darkness that vexes us is as the light of the midday sun to thee. Shed the radiance of thy wisdom on the paths of thy servants! Tell us, oh mouthpiece of the gods: what is their will concerning Thutmekri the Stygian?' ___The high-piled burnished mass of hair that caught the torchlight in dull bronze gleams quivered slightly. A gusty sigh rose from the blacks, half in awe, half in fear. Muriela's voice came plainly to Conan's ears in the breathless silence, and it seemed, cold, detached, impersonal, though the Cimmerian winced at the Corinthian accent. ___'It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan!' She was repeating his exact words. 'They are thieves and traitors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods!' ___There was a quiver in her voice as she ended, and Conan began to sweat, believing she was on the point of an hysterical collapse. But the blacks did not notice, any more than they identified the Corinthian accent, of which they knew nothing. They smote their palms softly together and a murmur of wonder and awe rose from them. Gorulga's eyes glittered fanatically in the torchlight. ___'Yelaya has spoken!' he cried in an exalted voice. 'It is the will of the gods! Long ago, in the days of our ancestors, they were made taboo and hidden at the command of the gods, who wrenched them from the awful jaws of Gwahlur the king of darkness, in the birth of the world. At the command of the gods the teeth of Gwahlur were hidden; at their command they shall be brought forth again. Oh star-born goddess, give us your leave to go to

the secret hiding-place of the Teeth to secure them for him whom the gods love!'___'You have my leave to go!' answered the false goddess, with an imperious gesture of dismissal that set Conan grinning again, and the priests backed out, ostrich plumes and torches rising and falling with the rhythm of their genuflexions.___The gold door closed and with a moan, the goddess fell back limply on the dais. 'Conan!' she whimpered faintly. 'Conan!'___'Shhh!' he hissed through the apertures, and turning, glided from the niche and closed the panel. A glimpse past the jamb of the carven door showed him the torches receding across the great throne-room, but he was at the same time aware of a radiance that did not emanate from the torches. He was startled, but the solution presented itself instantly. An early moon had risen and its light slanted through the pierced dome which by some curious workmanship intensified the light. The shining dome of Alkmeenon was no fable, then. Perhaps its interior was of the curious whitely flaming crystal found only in the hills of the black countries. The light flooded the throne-room and seeped into the chambers immediately adjoining.___But as Conan made toward the door that led into the throne-room, he was brought around suddenly by a noise that seemed to emanate from the passage that led off from the alcove. He crouched at the mouth, staring into it, remembering the clangor of the gong that had echoed from it to lure him into a snare. The light from the dome filtered only a little way into that narrow corridor, and showed him only empty space. Yet he could have sworn that he had heard the furtive pad of a foot somewhere down it.___While he hesitated, he was electrified by a woman's strangled cry from behind him. Bounding through the door behind the throne, he saw an unexpected spectacle in the crystal light.___The torches of the priests had vanished from the great hall outside - but one priest was still in the palace: Gwarunga. His wicked features were convulsed with fury, and he grasped the terrified Muriela by the throat, choking her efforts to scream and plead, shaking her brutally.___'Traitor!' Between his thick red lips his voice hissed like a cobra. 'What game are you playing? Did not Zargheba tell you what to say? Aye, Thutmekri told me! Are you betraying your master, or is he betraying his friends through you? Slut! I'll twist off your false head - but first I'll?'___A widening of his captive's lovely eyes as she stared over his shoulder warned the huge black. He released her and wheeled, just as Conan's sword lashed down. The impact of the stroke knocked him headlong backward to the marble floor, where he lay twitching, blood oozing from a ragged gash in his scalp.___Conan started toward him to finish the job - for he knew that the priest's sudden movement had caused the blade to strike flat - but Muriela threw her arms convulsively about him.___'I've done as you ordered!' she gasped hysterically. 'Take me away! Oh, please take me away!'___'We can't go yet,' he grunted. 'I want to follow the priests and see where they get the jewels. There may be more loot hidden there. But you can go with me. Where's the gem you wore in your hair?'___'It must have fallen out on the dais,' she stammered, feeling for it. 'I was so frightened - when the priests left I ran out to find you, and this big brute had stayed behind, and he grabbed me?'___'Well, go get it while I dispose of this carcass,' he commanded. 'Go on! That gem is worth a fortune itself.'___She hesitated, as if loth to return to that cryptic chamber; then, as he grasped Gwarunga's girdle and dragged him into the alcove, she turned and entered the oracle room.___Conan dumped the senseless black on the floor, and lifted his sword. The Cimmerian had lived too long in the wild places of the world to have any illusions about mercy. The only safe enemy was a headless enemy. But before he

could strike, a startling scream checked the lifted blade. It came from the oracle chamber.____'Conan! Conan! She's come back!' The shriek ended in a gurgle and a scraping shuffle.____With an oath Conan dashed out of the alcove, across the throne dais and into the oracle chamber, almost before the sound had ceased. There he halted, glaring bewilderedly. To all appearances Muriela lay placidly on the dais, eyes closed as in slumber.____'What in thunder are you doing?' he demanded acidly. 'Is this any time to be playing jokes?'____His voice trailed away. His gaze ran along the ivory thigh molded in the close-fitting silk skirt. That skirt should gape from girdle to hem. He knew, because it had been his own hand that tore it as he ruthlessly stripped the garment from the dancer's writhing body. But the skirt showed no rent. A single stride brought him to the dais and he laid his hand on the ivory body - snatched it away as if it had encountered hot iron instead of the cold immobility of death.____'Crom!' he muttered, his eyes suddenly slits of bale-fire. 'It's not Muriela! It's Yelaya!'____He understood now that frantic scream that had burst from Muriela's lips when she entered the chamber. The goddess had returned. The body had been stripped by Zargheba to furnish the accouterments for the pretender. Yet now it was clad in silk and jewels as Conan had first seen it. A peculiar prickling made itself manifest among the short hairs at the base of Conan's scalp.____'Muriela!' he shouted suddenly. 'Muriela! Where the devil are you?'____The walls threw back his voice mockingly. There was no entrance that he could see except the golden door, and none could have entered or departed through that without his knowledge. This much was indisputable: Yelaya had been replaced on the dais within the few minutes that had elapsed since Muriela had first left the chamber to be seized by Gwarunga; his ears were still tingling with the echoes of Muriela's scream, yet the Corinthian girl had vanished as if into thin air. There was but one explanation that offered itself to the Cimmerian, if he rejected the darker speculation that suggested the supernatural - somewhere in the chamber there was a secret door. And even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw it.____In what had seemed a curtain of solid marble, a thin perpendicular crack showed, and in the crack hung a wisp of silk. In an instant he was bending over it. That shred was from Muriela's torn skirt. The implication was unmistakable. It had been caught in the closing door and torn off as she was borne through the opening by whatever grim beings were her captors. The bit of clothing had prevented the door from fitting perfectly into its frame.____Thrusting his dagger-point into the crack, Conan exerted leverage with a corded forearm. The blade bent, but it was of unbreakable Akbitanan steel. The marble door opened. Conan's sword was lifted as he peered into the aperture beyond, but he saw no shape of menace. Light filtering into the oracle chamber revealed a short flight of steps cut out of marble. Pulling the door back to its fullest extent, he drove his dagger into a crack in the floor, propping it open. Then he went down the steps without hesitation. He saw nothing, heard nothing. A dozen steps down, the stair ended in a narrow corridor which ran straight away into gloom.____He halted suddenly, posed like a statue at the foot of the stair, staring at the paintings which frescoed the walls, half visible in the dim light which filtered down from above. The art was unmistakably Pelishtim; he had seen frescoes of identical characteristics on the walls of Asgalun. But the scenes depicted had no connection with anything Pelishtim, except for one human figure, frequently recurrent: a lean, white-bearded old man whose racial characteristics were unmistakable. They seemed to represent various sections of the palace above. Several scenes showed a chamber

he recognized as the oracle chamber with the figure of Yelaya stretched upon the ivory dais and huge black men kneeling before it. And there were other figures, too - figures that moved through the deserted palace, did the bidding of the Pelishtim, and dragged unnameable things out of the subterranean river. In the few seconds Conan stood frozen, hitherto unintelligible phrases in the parchment manuscript blazed in his brain with chilling clarity. The loose bits of the pattern clicked into place. The mystery of Bit-Yakin was a mystery no longer, nor the riddle of Bit-Yakin's servants. Conan turned and peered into the darkness, an icy finger crawling along his spine. Then he went along the corridor, cat-footed, and without hesitation, moving deeper and deeper into the darkness as he drew farther away from the stair. The air hung heavy with the odor he had scented in the court of the gong. Now in utter blackness he heard a sound ahead of him - the shuffle of bare feet, or the swish of loose garments against stone, he could not tell which. But an instant later his outstretched hand encountered a barrier which he identified as a massive door of carved metal. He pushed against it fruitlessly, and his sword-point sought vainly for a crack. It fitted into the sill and jambs as if molded there. He exerted all his strength, his feet straining against the door, the veins knotting in his temples. It was useless; a charge of elephants would scarcely have shaken that titanic portal. As he leaned there he caught a sound on the other side that his ears instantly identified - it was the creak of rusty iron, like a lever scraping in its slot. Instinctively action followed recognition so spontaneously that sound, impulse and action were practically simultaneous. And as his prodigious bound carried him backward, there was the rush of a great bulk from above, and a thunderous crash filled the tunnel with deafening vibrations. Bits of flying splinters struck him - a huge block of stone, he knew from the sound, dropped on the spot he had just quitted. An instant's slower thought or action and it would have crushed him like an ant. Conan fell back. Somewhere on the other side of that metal door Muriela was a captive, if she still lived. But he could not pass that door, and if he remained in the tunnel another block might fall, and he might not be so lucky. It would do the girl no good for him to be crushed into a purple pulp. He could not continue his search in that direction. He must get above ground and look for some other avenue of approach. He turned and hurried toward the stair, sighing as he emerged into comparative radiance. And as he set foot on the first step, the light was blotted out, and above him the marble door rushed shut with a resounding reverberation. Something like panic seized the Cimmerian then, trapped in that black tunnel, and he wheeled on the stair, lifting his sword and glaring murderously into the darkness behind him, expecting a rush of ghoul-like assailants. But there was no sound or movement down the tunnel. Did the men beyond the door - if they were men - believe that he had been disposed of by the fall of the stone from the roof, which had undoubtedly been released by some sort of machinery? Then why had the door been shut above him? Abandoning speculation, Conan groped his way up the steps, his skin crawling in anticipation of a knife in his back at every stride, yearning to drown his semi-panic in a barbarous burst of bloodletting. He thrust against the door at the top, and cursed soulfully to find that it did not give to his efforts. Then as he lifted his sword with his right hand to hew at the marble, his groping left encountered a metal bolt that evidently slipped into place at the closing of the door. In an instant he had drawn this bolt, and then the door gave to his shove. He bounded into the chamber like a

slit-eyed, snarling incarnation of fury, ferociously desirous to come to grips with whatever enemy was hounding him. The dagger was gone from the floor. The chamber was empty; and so was the dais. Yelaya had again vanished. 'By Crom!' muttered the Cimmerian. 'Is she alive, after all?' He strode out into the throne-room, baffled, and then, struck by a sudden thought, stepped behind the throne and peered into the alcove. There was blood on the smooth marble where he had cast down the senseless body of Gwarunga - that was all. The black man had vanished as completely as Yelaya.

The Teeth of Gwahlur

Baffled wrath confused the brain of Conan the Cimmerian. He knew no more how to go about searching for Muriela than he had known how to go about searching for the Teeth of Gwahlur. Only one thought occurred to him - to follow the priests. Perhaps at the hiding-place of the treasure some clue would be revealed to him. It was a slim chance, but better than wandering about aimlessly. As he hurried through the great shadowy hall that led to the portico, he half expected the lurking shades to come to life behind him with rending fangs and talons. But only the beat of his own rapid heart accompanied him into the moonlight that dappled the shimmering marble. At the foot of the wide steps he cast about in the bright moonlight for some sign to show him the direction he must go. And he found it - petals scattered on the sward told where an arm or garment had brushed against a blossom-laden branch. Grass had been pressed down under heavy feet. Conan, who had tracked wolves in his native hills, found no insurmountable difficulty in following the trail of the Keshani priests. It led away from the palace, through masses of exotic-scented shrubbery where great pale blossoms spread their shimmering petals, through verdant, tangled bushes that showered blooms at the touch, until he came at last to a great mass of rock that jutted like a titan's castle out from the cliffs at a point closest to the palace, which, however, was almost hidden from view by vine-interlaced trees. Evidently that babbling priest in Keshia had been mistaken when he said the Teeth were hidden in the palace. This trail had led him away from the place where Muriela had disappeared, but a belief was growing in Conan that each part of the valley was connected with that palace by subterranean passages. Crouching in the deep velvet-black shadows of the bushes, he scrutinized the great jut of rock which stood out in bold relief in the moonlight. It was covered with strange, grotesque carvings, depicting men and animals, and half-bestial creatures that might have been gods or devils. The style of art differed so strikingly from that of the rest of the valley, that Conan wondered if it did not represent a different era and race, and was itself a relic of an age lost and forgotten at whatever immeasurably distant date the people of Alkmeon had found and entered the haunted valley. A great door stood open in the sheer curtain of the cliff, and a gigantic dragon head was carved about it so that the open door was like the dragon's gaping mouth. The door itself was of carved bronze and looked to weigh several tons. There was no lock that he could see, but a series of bolts showing along the edge of the massive portal, as it stood open, told him that there was some system of locking and unlocking - a system doubtless known only to the priests of Keshan. The trail showed that Gorulga and his henchmen had gone through that door. But Conan hesitated. To wait until they emerged would probably mean to see the door locked in his face, and he might not be able to solve the mystery of its unlocking. On the other hand, if he followed them in, they might emerge and lock him in the cavern. Throwing caution to the winds, he glided silently through the great portal. Somewhere in the cavern were the

priests, the Teeth of Gwahlur, and perhaps a clue to the fate of Muriela. Personal risks had never yet deterred the Cimmerian from any purpose. Moonlight illumined, for a few yards, the wide tunnel in which he found himself. Somewhere ahead of him he saw a faint glow and heard the echo of a weird chanting. The priests were not so far ahead of him as he had thought. The tunnel debouched into a wide room before the moonlight played out, an empty cavern of no great dimensions, but with a lofty, vaulted roof, glowing with a phosphorescent encrustation, which, as Conan knew, was a common phenomenon in that part of the world. It made a ghostly half-light, in which he was able to see a bestial image squatting on a shrine and the black mouths of six or seven tunnels leading off from the chamber. Down the widest of these - the one directly behind the squat image which looked toward the outer opening - he caught the gleam of torches wavering, whereas the phosphorescent glow was fixed, and heard the chanting increase in volume. Down it he went recklessly, and was presently peering into a larger cavern than the one he had just left. There was no phosphorus here, but the light of the torches fell on a larger altar and a more obscene and repulsive god squatting toad-like upon it. Before this repugnant deity Gorulga and his ten acolytes knelt and beat their heads upon the ground, while chanting monotonously. Conan realized why their progress had been so slow. Evidently approaching the secret crypt of the Teeth was a complicated and elaborate ritual. He was fidgeting in nervous impatience before the chanting and bowing were over, but presently they rose and passed into the tunnel which opened behind the idol. Their torches bobbed away into the nighted vault, and he followed swiftly. Not much danger of being discovered. He glided along the shadows like a creature of the night, and the black priests were completely engrossed in their ceremonial mummery. Apparently they had not even noticed the absence of Gwarunga. Emerging into a cavern of huge proportions, about whose upward curving walls gallery-like ledges marched in tiers, they began their worship anew before an altar which was larger, and a god which was more disgusting, than any encountered thus far. Conan crouched in the black mouth of the tunnel, staring at the walls reflecting the lurid glow of the torches. He saw a carved stone stair winding up from tier to tier of the galleries; the roof was lost in darkness. He started violently and the chanting broke off as the kneeling blacks flung up their heads. An inhuman voice boomed out high above them. They froze on their knees, their faces turned upward with a ghastly blue hue in the sudden glare of a weird light that burst blindingly up near the lofty roof and then burned with a throbbing glow. That glare lighted a gallery and a cry went up from the high priest, echoed shudderingly by his acolytes. In the flash there had been briefly disclosed to them a slim white figure standing upright in a sheen of silk and a glint of jewel-crusted gold. Then the blaze smoldered to a throbbing, pulsing luminosity in which nothing was distinct, and that slim shape was but a shimmering blue of ivory. 'Yelayaf screamed Gorulga, his brown features ashen. 'Why have you followed us? What is your pleasure?' That weird unhuman voice rolled down from the roof, reechoing under that arching vault that magnified and altered it beyond recognition. 'Woe to the unbelievers! Woe to the false children of Keshia! Doom to them which deny their deity!' A cry of horror went up from the priests. Gorulga looked like a shocked vulture in the glare of the torches. 'I do not understand!' he stammered. 'We are faithful. In the chamber of the oracle you told us?' 'Do not heed what you heard in the chamber of the oracle!' rolled that terrible voice, multiplied until it was as though a myriad

voices thundered and muttered the same warning. 'Beware of false prophets and false gods! A demon in my guise spoke to you in the palace, giving false prophecy. Now harken and obey, for only I am the true goddess, and I give you one chance to save yourselves from doom!___'Take the Teeth of Gwahlur from the crypt where they were placed so long ago. Alkmeenon is no longer holy, because it has been desecrated by blasphemers. Give the Teeth of Gwahlur into the hands of Thutmekri, the Stygian, to place in the sanctuary of Dragon and Derketo. Only this can save Keshan from the doom the demons of the night have plotted. Take the Teeth of Gwahlur and go: return instantly to Keshia; there give the jewels to Thutmekri, and seize the foreign devil Conan and flay him alive in the great square.'___There was no hesitation in obeying. Chattering with fear the priests scrambled up and ran for the door that opened behind the bestial god. Gorulga led the flight. They jammed briefly in the doorway, yelping as wildly waving torches touched squirming black bodies; they plunged through, and the patter of their speeding feet dwindled down the tunnel.___Conan did not follow. He was consumed with a furious desire to learn the truth of this fantastic affair. Was that indeed Yelaya, as the cold sweat on the backs of his hands told him, or was it that little hussy Muriela, turned traitress after all? If it was?___Before the last torch had vanished down the black tunnel he was bounding vengefully up the stone stair. The blue glow was dying down, but he could still make out that the ivory figure stood motionless on the gallery. His blood ran cold as he approached it, but he did not hesitate. He came on with his sword lifted, and towered like a threat of death over the inscrutable shape.___'Yelaya!' he snarled. 'Dead as she's been for a thousand years! Ha!''___From the dark mouth of a tunnel behind him a dark form lunged. But the sudden, deadly rush of unshod feet had reached the Cimmerian's quick ears. He whirled like a cat and dodged the blow aimed murderously at his back. As the gleaming steel in the dark hand hissed past him, he struck back with the fury of a roused python, and the long straight blade impaled his assailant and stood out a foot and a half between his shoulders.___'So!' Conan tore his sword free as the victim sagged to the floor, gasping and gurgling. The man writhed briefly and stiffened. In the dying light Conan saw a black body and ebon countenance, hideous in the blue glare. He had killed Gwarunga.___Conan turned from the corpse to the goddess. Thongs about her knees and breast held her upright against a stone pillar, and her thick hair, fastened to the column, held her head up. At a few yards' distance these bonds were not visible in the uncertain light.___'He must have come to after I descended into the tunnel,' muttered Conan. 'He must have suspected I was down there. So he pulled out the dagger' - Conan stooped and wrenched the identical weapon from the stiffening fingers, glanced at it and replaced it in his own girdle - 'and shut the door. Then he took Yelaya to befool his brother idiots. That was he shouting a while ago. You couldn't recognize his voice, under this echoing roof. And that bursting blue flame - I thought it looked familiar. It's a trick of the Stygian priests. Thutmekri must have given some of it to Gwarunga.'___He could easily have reached this cavern ahead of his companions. Evidently familiar with the plan of the caverns by hearsay or by maps handed down in the priestcraft, he had entered the cave after the others, carrying the goddess, followed a circuitous route through the tunnels and chambers, and ensconced himself and his burden on the balcony while Gorulga and the other acolytes were engaged in their endless rituals.___The blue glare had faded, but now Conan was aware of another glow, emanating from the mouth of one of the corridors

that opened on the ledge. Somewhere down that corridor there was another field of phosphorus, for he recognized the faint steady radiance. The corridor led in the direction the priests had taken, and he decided to follow it, rather than descend into the darkness of the great cavern below. Doubtless it connected with another gallery in some other chamber, which might be the destination of the priests. He hurried down it, the illumination growing stronger as he advanced, until he could make out the floor and the walls of the tunnel. Ahead of him and below he could hear the priests chanting again.____Abruptly a doorway in the left-hand wall was limned in the phosphorus glow, and to his ears came the sound of soft, hysterical sobbing. He wheeled, and glared through the door.____He was looking again into a chamber hewn out of solid rock, not a natural cavern like the others. The domed roof shone with the phosphorous light, and the walls were almost covered with arabesques of beaten gold.____Near the farther wall on a granite throne, staring for ever toward the arched doorway, sat the monstrous and obscene Pteor, the god of the Pelishtim, wrought in brass, with his exaggerated attributes reflecting the grossness of his cult. And in his lap sprawled a limp white figure.____'Well, I'll be damned!' muttered Conan. He glanced suspiciously about the chamber, seeing no other entrance or evidence of occupation, and then advanced noiselessly and looked down at the girl whose slim shoulders shook with sobs of abject misery, her face sunk in her arms. From thick bands of gold on the idol's arms slim gold chains ran to smaller bands on her wrists. He laid a hand on her naked shoulder and she started convulsively, shrieked, and twisted her tear-stained face toward him.____'Conan!' She made a spasmodic effort to go into the usual clinch, but the chains hindered her. He cut through the soft gold as close to her wrists as he could, grunting: 'You'll have to wear these bracelets until I can find a chisel or a file. Let go of me, damn it! You actresses are too damned emotional. What happened to you, anyway?'____'When I went back into the oracle chamber,' she whimpered, 'I saw the goddess lying on the dais as I'd first seen her. I called out to you and started to run to the door - then something grabbed me from behind. It clapped a hand over my mouth and carried me through a panel in the wall, and down some steps and along a dark hall. I didn't see what it was that had hold of me until we passed through a big metal door and came into a tunnel whose roof was alight, like this chamber.____'Oh, I nearly fainted when I saw! They are not humans! They are gray, hairy devils that walk like men and speak a gibberish no human could understand. They stood there and seemed to be waiting, and once I thought I heard somebody trying the door. Then one of the things pulled a metal lever in the wall, and something crashed on the other side of the door.____'Then they carried me on and on through winding tunnels and up stone stairways into this chamber, where they chained me on the knees of this abominable idol, and then they went away. Oh, Conan, what are they?'____'Servants of Bit-Yakin,' he grunted. 'I found a manuscript that told me a number of things, and then stumbled upon some frescoes that told me the rest. Bit-Yakin was a Pelishtim who wandered into the valley with his servants after the people of Alkmeenon had deserted it. He found the body of Princess Yelaya, and discovered that the priests returned from time to time to make offerings to her, for even then she was worshipped as a goddess.____'He made an oracle of her, and he was the voice of the oracle, speaking from a niche he cut in the wall behind the ivory dais. The priests never suspected, never saw him or his servants for they always hid themselves when the men came. Bit-Yakin lived and died here without ever being discovered by the priests. Crom knows how long he

dwelt here, but it must have been for centuries. The wise men of the Pelishtim know how to increase the span of their lives for hundreds of years. I've seen some of them myself. Why he lived here alone, and why he played the part of oracle no ordinary human can guess, but I believe the oracle part was to keep the city inviolate and sacred, so he could remain undisturbed. He ate the food the priests brought as an offering to Yelaya, and his servants ate other things - I've always known there was a subterranean river flowing away from the lake where the people of the Puntish highlands throw their dead. That river runs under this palace. They have ladders hung over the water where they can hang and fish for the corpses that come floating through. BTT-Yakin recorded everything on parchment and painted walls.____'But he died at last, and his servants mummified him according to instructions he gave them before his death, and stuck him in a cave in the cliffs. The rest is easy to guess. His servants, who were even more nearly immortal than he, kept on dwelling here, but the next time a high priest came to consult the oracle, not having a master to restrain them, they tore him to pieces. So since then - until Gorulga ? nobody came to talk to the oracle.____'It's obvious they've been renewing the garments and ornaments of the goddess, as they'd seen Bi-Yakin do. Doubtless there's a sealed chamber somewhere where the silks are kept from decay. They clothed the goddess and brought her back to the oracle room after Zargheba had stolen her. And by the way they took off Zargheba's head and hung it in a thicket.'____She shivered, yet at the same time breathed a sigh of relief.____'He'll never whip me again.'____'Not this side of hell,' agreed Conan. 'But come on. Gwa-runga ruined my chances with his stolen goddess. I'm going to follow the priests and take my chance of stealing the loot from them after they get it. And you stay close to me. I can't spend all my time looking for you.'____'But the servants of Bit-Yakin!' she whispered fearfully.____'We'll have to take our chance,' he grunted. 'I don't know what's in their minds, but so far they haven't shown any disposition to come out and fight in the open. Come on.'____Taking her wrist he led her out of the chamber and down the corridor. As they advanced they heard the chanting of the priests, and mingling with the sound the low sullen rushing of waters. The light grew stronger above them as they emerged on a high-pitched gallery of a great cavern and looked down on a scene weird and fantastic.____Above them gleamed the phosphorescent roof; a hundred feet below them stretched the smooth floor of the cavern. On the far side this floor was cut by a deep, narrow stream brimming its rocky channel. Rushing out of impenetrable gloom, it swirled across the cavern and was lost again in darkness. The visible surface reflected the radiance above; the dark seething waters glinted as if flecked with living jewels, frosty blue, lurid red, shimmering green, an ever-changing iridescence.____Conan and his companion stood upon one of the gallery-like ledges that banded the curve of the lofty wall, and from this ledge a natural bridge of stone soared in a breath-taking arch over the vast gulf of the cavern to join a much smaller ledge on the opposite side, across the river. Ten feet below it another, broader arch spanned the cave. At either end a carved stair joined the extremities of these flying arches.____Conan's gaze, following the curve of the arch that swept away from the ledge on which they stood, caught a glint of light that was not the lurid phosphorus of the cavern. On that small ledge opposite them there was an opening in the cave wall through which stars were glinting.____But his full attention was drawn to the scene beneath them. The priests had reached their destination. There in a sweeping angle of the cavern wall stood a stone altar, but there was no idol

upon it. Whether there was one behind it, Conan could not ascertain, because some trick of the light, or the sweep of the wall, left the space behind the altar in total darkness. The priests had stuck their torches into holes in the stone floor, forming a semicircle of fire in front of the altar at a distance of several yards. Then the priests themselves formed a semicircle inside the crescent of torches, and Gorulga, after lifting his arms aloft in invocation, bent to the altar and laid hands on it. It lifted and tilted backward on its hinder edge, like the lid of a chest, revealing a small crypt. Extending a long arm into the recess, Gorulga brought up a small brass chest. Lowering the altar back into place, he set the chest on it, and threw back the lid. To the eager watchers on the high gallery it seemed as if the action had released a blaze of living fire which throbbed and quivered about the opened chest. Conan's heart leaped and his hand caught at his hilt. The Teeth of Gwahlur at last! The treasure that would make its possessor the richest man in the world! His breath came fast between his clenched teeth. Then he was suddenly aware that a new element had entered into the light of the torches and of the phosphorescent roof, rendering both void. Darkness stole around the altar, except for that glowing spot of evil radiance cast by the teeth of Gwahlur, and that grew and grew. The blacks froze into basaltic statues, their shadows streaming grotesquely and gigantically out behind them. The altar was laved in the glow now, and the astounded features of Gorulga stood out in sharp relief. Then the mysterious space behind the altar swam into the widening illumination. And slowly with the crawling light, figures became visible, like shapes growing out of the night and silence. At first they seemed like gray stone statues, those motionless shapes, hairy, man-like, yet hideously human; but their eyes were alive, cold sparks of gray icy fire. And as the weird glow lit their bestial countenances, Gorulga screamed and fell backward, throwing up his long arms in a gesture of frenzied horror. But a longer arm shot across the altar and a misshapen hand locked on his throat. Screaming and fighting, the high priest was dragged back across the altar; a hammer-like fist smashed down, and Gorulga's cries were stilled. Limp and broken he sagged across the altar, his brains oozing from his crushed skull. And then the servants of Bit-Yakin surged like a bursting flood from hell on the black priests who stood like horror-blasted images. Then there was slaughter, grim and appalling. Conan saw black bodies tossed like chaff in the inhuman hands of the slayers, against whose horrible strength and agility the daggers and swords of the priests were ineffective. He saw men lifted bodily and their heads cracked open against the stone altar. He saw a flaming torch, grasped in a monstrous hand, thrust inexorably down the gullet of an agonized wretch who writhed in vain against the arms that pinioned him. He saw a man torn in two pieces, as one might tear a chicken, and the bloody fragments hurled clear across the cavern. The massacre was as short and devastating as the rush of a hurricane. In a burst of red abysmal ferocity it was over, except for one wretch who fled screaming back the way the priests had come, pursued by a swarm of blood-dabbled shapes of horror which reached out their red-smearred hands for him. Fugitive and pursuers vanished down the black tunnel, and the screams of the human came back dwindling and confused by the distance. Muriela was on her knees clutching Conan's legs; her face pressed against his knee and her eyes tightly shut. She was a quaking, quivering mold of abject terror. But Conan was galvanized. A quick glance across at the aperture where the stars shone, a glance down at the chest that still blazed open on the blood-smearred altar, and he saw and seized the desperate

gamble. ___ 'I'm going after that chest!' he grated. 'Stay here!' ___ 'Oh, Mitra, no!' In an agony of fright she fell to the floor and caught at his sandals. 'Don't! Don't! Don't leave me!' ___ 'Lie still and keep your mouth shut!' he snapped, disengaging himself from her frantic clasp. ___ He disregarded the tortuous stair. He dropped from ledge to ledge with reckless haste. There was no sign of the monsters as his feet hit the floor. A few of the torches still flared in their sockets, the phosphorescent glow throbbed and quivered, and the river flowed with an almost articulate muttering, scintillant with undreamed radiances. The glow that had heralded the appearance of the servants had vanished with them. Only the light of the jewels in the brass chest shimmered and quivered. ___ He snatched the chest, noting its contents in one lustful glance - strange, curiously shapen stones that burned with an icy, non-terrestrial fire. He slammed the lid, thrust the chest under his arm, and ran back up the steps. He had no desire to encounter the hellish servants of Bit-Yakin. His glimpse of them in action had dispelled any illusion concerning their fighting ability. Why they had waited so long before striking at the invaders he was unable to say. What human could guess the motives or thoughts of these monstrosities? That they were possessed of craft and intelligence equal to humanity had been demonstrated. And there on the cavern floor lay crimson proof of their bestial ferocity. ___ The Corinthian girl still cowered on the gallery where he had left her. He caught her wrist and yanked her to her feet, grunting: 'I guess it's time to go!' ___ Too bemused with terror to be fully aware of what was going on, the girl suffered herself to be led across the dizzy span. It was not until they were poised over the rushing water that she looked down, voiced a startled yelp and would have fallen but for Conan's massive arm about her. Growling an objurgation in her ear, he snatched her up under his free arm and swept her, in a flutter of limply waving arms and legs, across the arch and into the aperture that opened at the other end. Without bothering to set her on her feet, he hurried through the short tunnel into which this aperture opened. An instant later they emerged upon a narrow ledge on the outer side of the cliffs that circled the valley. Less than a hundred feet below them the jungle waved in the starlight. ___ Looking down, Conan vented a gusty sigh of relief. He believed that he could negotiate the descent, even though burdened with the jewels and the girl; although he doubted if even he, unburdened, could have ascended at that spot. He set the chest, still smeared with Gorulga's blood and clotted with his brains, on the ledge, and was about to remove his girdle in order to tie the box to his back, when he was galvanized by a sound behind him, a sound sinister and unmistakable. ___ 'Stay here!' he snapped at the bewildered Corinthian girl. 'Don't move!' And drawing his sword, he glided into the tunnel, glaring back into the cavern. ___ Halfway across the upper span he saw a gray deformed shape. One of the servants of Bit-Yakin was on his trail. There was no doubt that the brute had seen them and was following them. Conan did not hesitate. It might be easier to defend the mouth of the tunnel - but this fight must be finished quickly, before the other servants could return. ___ He ran out on the span, straight toward the oncoming monster. It was no ape, neither was it a man. It was some shambling horror spawned in the mysterious, nameless jungles of the south, where strange life teemed in the reeking rot without the dominance of man, and drums thundered in temples that had never known the tread of a human foot. How the ancient Pelishtim had gained lordship over them - and with it eternal exile from humanity - was a foul riddle about which Conan did not care to speculate, even if he had

had opportunity. ___Man and monster; they met at the highest arch of the span, where, a hundred feet below, rushed the furious black water. As the monstrous shape with its leprous gray body and the features of a carven, unhuman idol loomed over him. Conan struck as a wounded tiger strikes, with every ounce of thew and fury behind the blow. That stroke would have sheared a human body asunder; but the bones of the servant of Bit-Yakin were like tempered steel. Yet even tempered steel could not wholly have withstood that furious stroke. Ribs and shoulder-bone parted and blood spouted from the great gash. ___There was no time for a second stroke. Before the Cimmerian could lift his blade again or spring clear, the sweep of a giant arm knocked him from the span as a fly is flicked from a wall. As he plunged downward the rush of the river was like a knell in his ears, but his twisted body fell halfway across the lower arch. He wavered there precariously for one blood-chilling instant, then his clutching fingers hooked over the farther edge, and he scrambled to safety, his sword still in his other hand. ___As he sprang up, he saw the monster, spurting blood hideously, rush toward the cliff-end of the bridge, obviously intending to descend the stair that connected the arches and renew the feud. At the very ledge the brute paused in mid-flight - and Conan saw it too - Muriela, with the jewel chest under her arm, stood staring wildly in the mouth of the tunnel. ___With a triumphant bellow the monster scooped her up under one arm, snatched the jewel chest with the other hand as she dropped it, and turning, lumbered back across the bridge. Conan cursed with passion and ran for the other side also. He doubted if he could climb the stair to the higher arch in time to catch the brute before it could plunge into the labyrinth of tunnels on the other side. ___But the monster was slowing, like clockwork running down. Blood gushed from that terrible gash in his breast, and he lurched drunkenly from side to side. Suddenly he stumbled, reeled and toppled sidewise - pitched headlong from the arch and hurtled downward. Girl and jewel chest fell from his nerveless hands and Muriela's scream rang terribly above the snarl of the water below. ___Conan was almost under the spot from which the creature had fallen. The monster struck the lower arch glancingly and shot off, but the writhing figure of the girl struck and clung, and the chest hit the edge of the span near her. One falling object struck on one side of Conan and one on the other. Either was within arm's length; for the fraction of a split second the chest teetered on the edge of the bridge, and Muriela clung by one arm, her face turned desperately toward Conan, her eyes dilated with the fear of death and her lips parted in a haunting cry of despair. ___Conan did not hesitate, nor did he even glance toward the chest that held the wealth of an epoch. With a quickness that would have shamed the spring of a hungry jaguar, he swooped, grasped the girl's arm just as her fingers slipped from the smooth stone, and snatched her up on the span with one explosive heave. The chest toppled on over and struck the water ninety feet below, where the body of the servant of Bit-Yakin had already vanished. A splash, a jetting flash of foam marked where the Teeth of Gwahlur disappeared for ever from the sight of the man. ___Conan scarcely wasted a downward glance. He darted across the span and ran up the cliff stair like a cat, carrying the limp girl as if she had been an infant. A hideous ululation caused him to glance over his shoulder as he reached the higher arch, to see the other servants streaming back into the cavern below, blood dripping from their bared fangs. They raced up the stair that wound from tier to tier, roaring vengefully; but he slung the girl unceremoniously over his shoulder, dashed through the tunnel and went down the cliffs like an ape himself, dropping and

springing from hold to hold with breakneck recklessness. When the fierce countenances looked over the ledge of the aperture, it was to see the Cimmerian and the girl disappearing into the forest that surrounded the cliffs.____'Well,' said Conan, setting the girl on her feet within the sheltering screen of branches, 'we can take our time now. I don't think those brutes will follow us outside the valley. Anyway, I've got a horse tied at a water-hole close by, if the lions haven't eaten him. Crom's devils! What are you crying about nami?____She covered her tear-stained face with her hands, and her slim shoulders shook with sobs.____'I lost the jewels for you,' she wailed miserably. 'It was my fault. If I'd obeyed you and stayed out on the ledge, that brute would never have seen me. You should have caught the gems and let me drown!____'Yes, I suppose I should,' he agreed. 'But forget it. Never worry about what's past. And stop crying, will you? That's better. Come on.'____'You mean you're going to keep me? Take me with you?' she asked hopefully.____'What else do you suppose I'd do with you?' He ran an approving glance over her figure and grinned at the torn skirt which revealed a generous expanse of tempting ivory-tinted curves. 'I can use an actress like you. There's no use going back to Keshia. There's nothing in Keshan now that I want. We'll go to Punt. The people of Punt worship an ivory woman, and they wash gold out of the rivers in wicker baskets. I'll tell them that Keshan is intriguing with Thutmekri to enslave them -which is true -and that the gods have sent me to protect them - for about a houseful of gold. If I can manage to smuggle you into their temple to exchange places with their ivory goddess, we'll skin them out of their jaw teeth before we get through with them!'

BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER_____1

Conan Loses his Ax_____The stillness of the forest trail was so primeval that the tread of a soft-booted foot was a startling disturbance. At least it seemed so to the ears of the wayfarer, though he was moving along the path with the caution that must be practised by any man who ventures beyond Thunder River. He was a young man of medium height, with an open countenance and a mop of tousled tawny hair unconfined by cap or helmet. His garb was common enough for that country - a coarse tunic, belted at the waist, short leather breeches beneath, and soft buckskin boots that came short of the knee. A knife-hilt jutted from one boot-top. The broad leather belt supported a short, heavy sword and a buckskin pouch. There was no perturbation in the wide eyes that scanned the green walls which fringed the trail. Though not tall, he was well built, and the arms that the short wide sleeves of the tunic left bare were thick with corded muscle.____He tramped imperturbably along, although the last settler's cabin lay miles behind him, and each step was carrying him nearer the grim peril that hung like a brooding shadow over the ancient forest.____He was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, though he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness. His careless attitude was not genuine; his eyes and ears were keenly alert, especially his ears, for no gaze could penetrate the leafy tangle for more than a few feet in either direction.____But it was instinct more than any warning by the external senses which brought him up suddenly, his hand on his hilt. He stood stock-still in the middle of the trail, unconsciously holding his breath, wondering what he had heard, and wondering if indeed he had heard anything. The silence seemed absolute. Not a squirrel chattered or bird chirped. Then his gaze fixed itself on a mass of bushes beside the trail a few yards ahead of him. There was no breeze, yet he had seen a branch quiver. The

short hairs on his scalp prickled, and he stood for an instant undecided, certain that a move in either direction would bring death streaking at him from the bushes.____A heavy chopping crunch sounded behind the leaves. The bushes were shaken violently, and simultaneously with the sound, an arrow arched erratically from among them and vanished among the trees along the trail. The wayfarer glimpsed its flight as he sprang frantically to cover.____Crouching behind a thick stem, his sword quivering in his fingers, he saw the bushes part, and a tall figure stepped leisurely into the trail. The traveler stared in surprise. The stranger was clad like himself in regard to boots and breeks, though the latter were of silk instead of leather. But he wore a sleeveless hauberk of dark mesh-mail in place of a tunic, and a helmet perched on his black mane. That helmet held the other's gaze; it was without a crest, but adorned by short bull's horns. No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background. The man held a broadsword in his right hand, and the edge was smeared with crimson.____'Come on out,' he called, in an accent unfamiliar to the wayfarer. 'All's safe now. There was only one of the dogs. Come on out.'____The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man - the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore the reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even of that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.____Turning, he stepped back to the bushes and pulled them apart. Still not certain just what had happened, the wayfarer from the east advanced and stared down into the bushes. A man lay there, a short, dark, thickly-muscled man, naked except for a loin-cloth, a necklace of human teeth and a brass armet. A short sword was thrust into the girdle of the loin-cloth, and one hand still gripped a heavy black bow. The man had long black hair; that was about all the wayfarer could tell about his head, for his features were a mask of blood and brains. His skull had been split to the teeth.____'A Pict, by the gods!' exclaimed the wayfarer.____The burning blue eyes turned upon him.____'Are you surprised?'____'Why, they told me at Velitrium and again at the settlers' cabins along the road, that these devils sometimes sneaked across the border, but I didn't expect to meet one this far in the interior.'____'You're only four miles east of Black River,' the stranger informed him. 'They've been shot within a mile of Velitrium. No settler between Thunder River and Fort Tuscelan is really safe. I picked up this dog's trail three miles south of the fort this morning, and I've been following him ever since. I came up behind him just as he was drawing an arrow on you. Another instant and there'd have been a stranger in Hell. But I spoiled his aim for him.'____The wayfarer was staring wide-eyed at the larger man, dumfounded by the realization that the man had actually tracked down one of the forest-devils and slain him unsuspected. That implied woodsmanship of a quality undreamed, even for Conajohara.____'You are one of the fort's garrison?' he asked.____'I'm no soldier. I draw the pay and rations of an officer of the line, but I do my work in the woods. Valannus knows I'm of more use ranging along the river than cooped up in the fort.'____Casually the slayer shoved the body deeper into the thickets with his foot, pulled the bushes together and turned away down the trail. The other followed him.____'My name is Balthus,' he offered. 'I was at Velitrium last night. I haven't decided whether I'll

take up a hide of land, or enter fort-service.'___'The best land near Thunder River is already taken,' grunted the slayer. 'Plenty of good land between Scalp Creek - you crossed it a few miles back - and the fort, but that's getting too devilish close to the river. The Picts steal over to burn and murder - as that one did. They don't always come singly. Some day they'll try to sweep the settlers out of Conajohara. And they may succeed - probably will succeed. This colonization business is mad, anyway. There's plenty of good land east of the Bossonian marches. If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons, and plant wheat where now only deer are hunted, they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them.'___'That's queer talk from a man in the service of the Governor of Conajohara,' objected Balthus.___'It's nothing to me,' the other retorted. 'I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword to the highest bidder. I never planted wheat and never will, so long as there are other harvests to be reaped with the sword. But you Hyborians have expanded as far as you'll be allowed to expand. You've crossed the marches, burned a few villages, exterminated a few clans and pushed back the frontier to Black River; but I doubt if you'll even be able to hold what you've conquered, and you'll never push the frontier any further westward. Your idiotic king doesn't understand conditions here. He won't send you enough reinforcements, and there are not enough settlers to withstand the shock of a concerted attack from across the river.'___'But the Picts are divided into small clans,' persisted Balthus. 'they'll never unite. We can whip any single clan.'___'Or any three or four clans,' admitted the slayer. 'But some day a man will rise and unite thirty or forty clans, just as was done among the Cimmerians, when the Gundermen tried to push the border northward, years ago. They tried to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria: destroyed a few small clans, built a fort-town, Venarium - you've heard the tale.'___'So I have indeed,' replied Balthus, wincing. The memory of that red disaster was a black blot in the chronicles of a proud and war-like people. 'My uncle was at Venarium when the Cimmerians swarmed over the walls. He was one of the few who escaped that slaughter. I've heard him tell the tale, many a time. The barbarians swept out of the hills in a ravaging horde, without warning, and stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them. Men, women and children were butchered. Venarium was reduced to a mass of charred ruins, as it is to this day. The Aquilonians were driven back across the marches, and have never since tried to colonize the Cimmerian country. But you speak of Venarium familiarly. Perhaps you were there?'___'I was,' grunted the other. 'I was one of the horde that swarmed over the hills. I hadn't yet seen fifteen snows, but already my name was repeated about the council fires.'___Balthus involuntarily recoiled, staring. It seemed incredible that the man walking tranquilly at his side should have been one of those screeching, blood-mad devils that had poured over the walls of Venarium on that long-gone day to make her streets run crimson.___'Then you, too, are a barbarian!' he exclaimed involuntarily.___The other nodded, without taking offence.___'I am Conan, a Cimmerian.'___'I've heard of you.' Fresh interest quickened Balthus' gaze. No wonder the Pict had fallen victim to his own sort of subtlety. The Cimmerians were barbarians as ferocious as the Picts, and much more intelligent. Evidently Conan had spent much time among civilized men, though that contact had obviously not softened him, nor weakened any of his primitive instincts. Balthus' apprehension turned to admiration as he marked the easy cat-like stride, the effortless silence with which the Cimmerian moved along the trail. The oiled links

of his armor did not clink, and Balthus knew Conan could glide through the deepest thicket or most tangled copse as noiselessly as any naked Pict that ever lived.____'You're not a Gunderman?' It was more assertion than question.____Balthus shook his head. 'I'm from the Tauran.'____'I've seen good woodsmen from the Tauran. But the Bosson-ians have sheltered you Aquilonians from the outer wildernesses for too many centuries. You need hardening.'____That was true; the Bossonian marches, with their fortified villages filled with determined bowmen, had long served Aquilonia as a buffer against the outlying barbarians. Now among the settlers beyond Thunder River there was growing up a breed of forest-men capable of meeting the barbarians at their own game, but their numbers were still scanty. Most of the frontiersmen were like Balthus - more of the settler than the woodsman type.____The sun had not set, but it was no longer in sight, hidden as it was behind the dense forest wall. The shadows were lengthening, deepening back in the woods as the companions strode on down the trail.____'It will be dark before we reach the fort,' commented Conan casually; then: 'Listen!'____He stopped short, half crouching, sword ready, transformed into a savage figure of suspicion and menace, poised to spring and rend. Balthus had heard it too - a wild scream that broke at its highest note. It was the cry of a man in dire fear or agony.____Conan was off in an instant, racing down the trail, each stride widening the distance between him and his straining companion. Balthus puffed a curse. Among the settlements of the Tauran he was accounted a good runner, but Conan was leaving him behind with maddening ease. Then Balthus forgot his exasperation as his ears were outraged by the most frightful cry he had ever heard. It was not human, this one; it was a demoniacal caterwauling of hideous triumph that seemed to exult over fallen humanity and find echo in black gulfs beyond human ken.____Balthus faltered in his stride, and clammy sweat beaded his flesh. But Conan did not hesitate; he darted around a bend in the trail and disappeared, and Balthus, panicky at finding himself alone with that awful scream still shuddering through the forest in grisly echoes, put on an extra burst of speed and plunged after him.____The Aquilonian slid to a stumbling halt, almost colliding with the Cimmerian who stood in the trail over a crumpled body. But Conan was not looking at the corpse which lay there in the crimson-soaked dust. He was glaring into the deep woods on either side of the trail.____Balthus muttered a horrified oath. It was the body of a man which lay there in the trail, a short, fat man, clad in the gilt-worked boots and (despite the heat) the ermine-trimmed tunic of a wealthy merchant. His fat, pale face was set in a stare of frozen horror; his thick throat had been slashed from ear to ear as if by a razor-sharp blade. The short sword still in its scabbard seemed to indicate that he had been struck down without a chance to fight for his life.____'A Pict?' Balthus whispered, as he turned to peer into the deepening shadows of the forest.____Conan shook his head and straightened to scowl down at the dead man.____'A forest devil. This is the fifth, by Crom!'____'What do you mean?'____'Did you ever hear of a Pictish wizard called Zogar Sag?'____Balthus shook his head uneasily.____'He dwells in Gwawela, the nearest village across the river. Three months ago he hid beside this road and stole a string of pack-mules from a pack-train bound for the fort - drugged their drivers, somehow. The mules belonged to this man' - Conan casually indicated the corpse with his foot - 'Tiberias, a merchant of Velitrium. They were loaded with ale-kegs, and old Zogar stopped to guzzle before he got across the river. A woodsman named Soractus trailed him, and led Valannus and three soldiers to where he lay dead drunk in a thicket. At the importunities of Tiberias,

Valannus threw Zogar Sag into a cell, which is the worst insult you can give a Pict. He managed to kill his guard and escape, and sent back word that he meant to kill Tiberias and the five men who captured him in a way that would make Aquilonians shudder for centuries to come.____'Well, Soractus and the soldiers are dead. Soractus was killed on the river, the soldiers in the very shadow of the fort. And now Tiberias is dead. No Pict killed any of them. Each victim -except Tiberias, as you see - lacked his head - which no doubt is now ornamenting the altar of Zogar Sag's particular god.'____'How do you know they weren't killed by the Picts?' demanded Balthus.____Conan pointed to the corpse of the merchant.____'You think that was done with a knife or a sword? Look closer and you'll see that only a talon could have made a gash like that. The flesh is ripped, not cut.'____'Perhaps a panther?' began Balthus, without conviction.____Conan shook his head impatiently.____'A man from the Tauran couldn't mistake the mark of a panther's claws. No. It's a forest devil summoned by Zogar Sag to carry out his revenge. Tiberias was a fool to start for Velitrium alone, and so close to dusk. But each one of the victims seemed to be smitten with madness just before doom overtook him. Look here; the signs are plain enough. Tiberias came riding along the trail on his mule, maybe with a bundle of choice otter pelts behind his saddle to sell in Velitrium, and the thing sprang on him from behind that bush. See where the branches are crushed down.____'Tiberias gave one scream, and then his throat was torn open and he was selling his otter skins in Hell. The mule ran away into the woods. Listen! Even now you can hear him thrashing about under the trees. The demon didn't have time to take Tiberias' head; it took fright as we came up.'____'As you came up,' amended Balthus. 'It must not be a very terrible creature if it flees from one armed man. But how do you know it was not a Pict with some kind of a hook that rips instead of slicing? Did you see it?'____'Tiberias was an armed man,' grunted Conan. 'If Zogar Sag can bring demons to aid him, he can tell them which men to kill and which to let alone. No, I didn't see it. I only saw the bushes shake as it left the trail. But if you want further proof, look here!'____The slayer had stepped into the pool of blood in which the dead man sprawled. Under the bushes at the edge of the path there was a footprint, made in blood on the hard loam.____'Did a man make that?' demanded Conan.____Balthus felt his scalp prickle. Neither man nor any beast that he had ever seen could have left that strange, monstrous three-toed print, that was curiously combined of the bird and the reptile, yet a true type of neither. He spread his fingers above the print, careful not to touch it, and grunted explosively. He could not span the mark.____'What is it?' he whispered. 'I never saw a beast that left a spoor like that.'____'Nor any other sane man,' answered Conan grimly. 'It's a swamp demon - they're thick as bats in the swamps beyond Black River. You can hear them howling like damned souls when the wind blows strong from the south on hot nights.'____'What shall we do?' asked the Aquilonian, peering uneasily into the deep blue shadows. The frozen fear on the dead countenance haunted him. He wondered what hideous head the wretch had seen thrust grinning from among the leaves to chill his blood with terror.____'No use to try to follow a demon,' grunted Conan, drawing a short woodsman's ax from his girdle. 'I tried tracking him after he killed Soractus. I lost his trail within a dozen steps. He might have grown himself wings and flown away, or sunk down through the earth to Hell. I don't know. I'm not going after the mule, either. It'll either wander back to the fort, or to some settler's cabin.'____As he spoke Conan was busy at the edge of the trail with his ax. With a

few strokes he cut a pair of saplings nine or ten feet long, and denuded them of their branches. Then he cut a length from a serpent-like vine that crawled among the bushes near by, and making one end fast to one of the poles, a couple of feet from the end, whipped the vine over the other sapling and interlaced it back and forth. In a few moments he had a crude but strong litter.____'The demon isn't going to get Tiberias' head if I can help it,' he growled. 'We'll carry the body into the fort. It isn't more than three miles. I never liked the fat fool, but we can't have Pictish devils making so cursed free with white men's heads.'____The Picts were a white race, though swarthy, but the border men never spoke of them as such.____Balthus took the rear end of the litter, onto which Conan unceremoniously dumped the unfortunate merchant, and they moved on down the trail as swiftly as possible. Conan made no more noise laden with their grim burden than he had made when unencumbered. He had made a loop with the merchant's belt at the end of the poles, and was carrying his share of the load with one hand, while the other gripped his naked broadsword, and his restless gaze roved the sinister walls about them. The shadows were thickening. A darkening blue mist blurred the outlines of the foliage. The forest deepened in the twilight, became a blue haunt of mystery sheltering unguessed things.____They had covered more than a mile, and the muscles in Balthus' sturdy arms were beginning to ache a little, when a cry rang shuddering from the woods whose blue shadows were deepening into purple.____Conan started convulsively, and Balthus almost let go the poles.____'A woman!' cried the younger man. 'Great Mitra, a woman cried out then!'____'A settler's wife straying in the woods,' snarled Conan, setting down his end of the litter. 'Looking for a cow, probably, and - stay here!'____He dived like a hunting wolf into the leafy wall. Balthus' hair bristled.____'Stay here alone with this corpse and a devil hiding in the woods?' he yelled. 'I'm coming with you!'____And suiting action to words, he plunged after the Cimmerian. Conan glanced back at him, but made no objection, though he did not moderate his pace to accommodate the shorter legs of his companion. Balthus wasted his wind in swearing as the Cimmerian drew away from him again, like a phantom between the trees, and then Conan burst into a dim glade and halted crouching, lips snarling, sword lifted.____'What are we stopping for?' panted Balthus, dashing the sweat out of his eyes and gripping his short sword.____'That scream came from this glade, or near by,' answered Conan. 'I don't mistake the location of sounds, even in the woods. But where?'____Abruptly the sound rang out again - behind them; in the direction of the trail they had just quitted. It rose piercingly and pitifully, the cry of a woman in frantic terror - and then, shockingly, it changed to a yell of mocking laughter that might have burst from the lips of a fiend of lower Hell.____'What in Mitra's name?' Balthus' face was a pale blur in the gloom.____With a scorching oath Conan wheeled and dashed back the way he had come, and the Aquilonian stumbled bewilderedly after him. He blundered into the Cimmerian as the latter stopped dead, and rebounded from his brawny shoulders as though from an iron statue. Gasping from the impact, he heard Conan's breath hiss through his teeth. The Cimmerian seemed frozen in his tracks.____Looking over his shoulder, Balthus felt his hair stand up stiffly. Something was moving through the deep bushes that fringed the trail - something that neither walked nor flew, but seemed to glide like a serpent. But it was not a serpent. Its outlines were indistinct, but it was taller than a man, and not very bulky. It gave off a glimmer of weird light, like a faint blue flame. Indeed, the eery fire was the only tangible thing about it. It might have been an embodied flame moving with reason

and purpose through the blackening woods.____Conan snarled a savage curse and hurled his ax with ferocious will. But the thing glided on without altering its course. Indeed it was only a few instants' fleeting glimpse they had of it - a tall, shadowy thing of misty flame floating through the thickets. Then it was gone, and the forest crouched in breathless stillness.____With a snarl Conan plunged through the intervening foliage and into the trail. His profanity, as Balthus floundered after him, was lurid and impassioned. The Cimmerian was standing over the litter on which lay the body of Tiberias. And that body no longer possessed a head.____'Tricked us with its damnable caterwauling!' raved Conan, swinging his great sword about his head in his wrath. 'I might have known! I might have guessed a trick! Now there'll be five heads to decorate Zogar's altar.'____'But what thing is it that can cry like a woman and laugh like a devil, and shines like witch-fire as it glides through the trees?' gasped Balthus, mopping the sweat from his pale face.____'A swamp devil,' responded Conan morosely. 'Grab those poles. We'll take in the body, anyway. At least our load's a bit lighter.'____With which grim philosophy he gripped the leathery loop and stalked down the trail._____2 The Wizard of Gwawela_____Fort Tuscelan stood on the eastern bank of Black River, the tides of which washed the foot of the stockade. The latter was of logs, as were all the buildings within, including the donjon (to dignify it by that appellation), in which were the governor's quarters, overlooking the stockade and the sullen river. Beyond that river lay a huge forest, which approached jungle-like density along the spongy shores. Men paced the runways along the log parapet day and night, watching that dense green wall. Seldom a menacing figure appeared, but the sentries knew that they too were watched, fiercely, hungrily, with the mercilessness of ancient hate. The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there, not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts.____There, at the fort, civilization ended. Fort Tuscelan was the last outpost of a civilized world; it represented the westernmost thrust of the dominant Hyborian races. Beyond the river the primitive still reigned in shadowy forests, brush-thatched huts where hung the grinning skulls of men, and mud-walled enclosures where fires flickered and drums rumbled, and spears were whetted in the hands of dark, silent men with tangled black hair and the eyes of serpents. Those eyes often glared through the bushes at the fort across the river. Once dark-skinned men had built their huts where that fort stood; yes, and their huts had risen where now stood the fields and log cabins of fair-haired settlers, back beyond Velitrium, that raw, turbulent frontier town on the banks of Thunder River, to the shores of that other river that bounds the Bossonian marches. Traders had come, and priests of Mitra who walked with bare feet and empty hands, and died horribly, most of them; but soldiers had followed, and men with axes in their hands and women and children in ox-drawn wains. Back to Thunder River, and still back, beyond Black River the aborigines had been pushed, with slaughter and massacre. But the dark-skinned people did not forget that once Conajohara had been theirs.____The guard inside the eastern gate bawled a challenge. Through a barred aperture torchlight flickered, glinting on a steel head-piece and suspicious eyes beneath it.____'Open the gate,' snorted Conan. 'You see it's I, don't you?' Military discipline put his teeth on edge. The gate swung inward and Conan and his companion passed through. Balthus noted that the gate was flanked by a tower on each side, the summits of which rose above the stockade. He saw loopholes for arrows.____The

guardsmen grunted as they saw the burden borne between the men. Their pikes jangled against each other as they thrust shut the gate, chin on shoulder, and Conan asked testily: 'Have you never seen a headless body before?' The face of the soldiers were pallid in the torchlight. That's Tiberias,' blurted one. 'I recognize that fur-trimmed tunic. Valerius here owes me five lunas. I told him Tiberias had heard the loon call when he rode through the gate on his mule, with his glassy stare. I wagered he'd come back without his head.'___Conan grunted enigmatically, motioned Balthus to ease the litter to the ground, and then strode off toward the governor's quarters, with the Aquilonian at his heels. The tousle-headed youth stared about him eagerly and curiously, noting the rows of barracks along the walls, the stables, the tiny merchants' stalls, the towering blockhouse, and the other buildings, with the open square in the middle where the soldiers drilled, and where, now, fires danced and men off duty lounged. These were now hurrying to join the morbid crowd gathered about the litter at the gate. The rangy figures of Aquilonian pikemen and forest runners mingled with the shorter, stockier forms of Bossonian archers.___He was not greatly surprised that the governor received them himself. Autocratic society with its rigid caste laws lay east of the marches. Valannus was still a young man, well knit, with a finely chiseled countenance already carved into sober cast by toil and responsibility.___'You left the fort before daybreak, I was told,' he said to Conan. 'I had begun to fear that the Picts had caught you at last.'___'When they smoke my head the whole river will know it,' grunted Conan. 'They'll hear Pictish women wailing their dead as far as Velitrium - I was on a lone scout. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing drums talking across the river.'___'They talk each night,' reminded the governor, his fine eyes shadowed, as he stared closely at Conan. He had learned the unwisdom of discounting wild men's instincts.___'There was a difference last night,' growled Conan. 'There has been ever since Zogar Sag got back across the river.'___'We should either have given him presents and sent him home, or else hanged him,' sighed the governor. 'You advised that, but?___'But it's hard for you Hyborians to learn the ways of the outlands,' said Conan. 'Well, it can't be helped now, but there'll be no peace on the border so long as Zogar lives and remembers the cell he sweated in. I was following a warrior who slipped over to put a few white notches on his bow. After I split his head I fell in with this lad whose name is Balthus and who's come from the Tauran to help hold the frontier.'___Valannus approvingly eyed the young man's frank countenance and strongly-knit frame.___'I am glad to welcome you, young sir. I wish more of your people would come. We need men used to forest life. Many of our soldiers and some of our settlers are from the eastern provinces and know nothing of woodcraft, or even of agricultural life.'___'Not many of that breed this side of Velitrium,' grunted Conan. 'That town's full of them, though. But listen, Valannus, we found Tiberias dead on the trail.' And in a few words he related the grisly affair.___Valannus paled. 'I did not know he had left the fort. He must have been mad!'___'He was,' answered Conan. 'Like the other four; each one, when his time came, went mad and rushed into the woods to meet his death like a hare running down the throat of a python. Something called to them from the deeps of the forest, something the men call a loon, for lack of a better name, but only the doomed ones could hear it. Zogar Sag has made a magic that Aquilonian civilization can't overcome.'___To this thrust Valannus made no reply; he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.___'Do the soldiers know of this?'___'We left the body by the eastern gate.'___'You should have

concealed the fact, hidden the corpse somewhere in the woods. The soldiers are nervous enough already.'___'They'd have found it out some way. If I'd hidden the body, it would have been returned to the fort as the corpse of Soractus was - tied up outside the gate for the men to find in the morning.'___Valannus shuddered. Turning, he walked to a casement and stared silently out over the river, black and shiny under the glint of the stars. Beyond the river the jungle rose like an ebony wall. The distant screech of a panther broke the stillness. The night pressed in, blurring the sounds of the soldiers outside the blockhouse, dimming the fires. A wind whispered through the black branches, rippling the dusky water. On its wings came a low, rhythmic pulsing, sinister as the pad of a leopard's foot.___'After all,' said Valannus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, 'what do we know - what does anyone know - of the things that jungle may hide? We have dim rumors of great swamps and rivers, and a forest that stretches on and on over everlasting plains and hills to end at last on the shores of the western ocean. But what things lie between this river and that ocean we dare not even guess. No white man has ever plunged deep into that fastness and returned alive to tell us what he found. We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far - to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?___'Who knows what gods are worshipped under the shadows of that heathen forest, or what devils crawl out of the black ooze of the swamps? Who can be sure that all the inhabitants of that black country are natural? Zogar Sag - a sage of the eastern cities would sneer at his primitive magic-making as the mummery of a fakir; yet he has driven mad and killed five men in a manner no man can explain. I wonder if he himself is wholly human.'___'If I can get within ax-throwing distance of him I'll settle that question,' growled Conan, helping himself to the governor's wine and pushing a glass toward Balthus, who took it hesitatingly, and with an uncertain glance toward Valannus.___The governor turned toward Conan and stared at him thoughtfully.___'The soldiers, who do not believe in ghosts or devils,' he said, 'are almost in a panic of fear. You, who believe in ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and all manner of uncanny things, do not seem to fear any of the things in which you believe.'___'There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut,' answered Conan. 'I threw my ax at the demon, and he took no hurt, but I might have missed, in the dusk, or a branch deflected its flight. I'm not going out of my way looking for devils; but I wouldn't step out of my path to let one go by.'___Valannus lifted his head and met Conan's gaze squarely.___'Conan, more depends on you than you realize. You know the weakness of this province - a slender wedge thrust into the untamed wilderness. You know that the lives of all the people west of the marches depend on this fort. Were it to fall, red axes would be splintering the gates of Velitrium before a horseman could cross the marches. His majesty, or his majesty's advisers, have ignored my plea that more troops be sent to hold the frontier. They know nothing of border conditions, and are averse to expending any more money in this direction. The fate of the frontier depends upon the men who now hold it.___'You know that most of the army which conquered Conajo-hara has been withdrawn. You know the force left me is inadequate, especially since that devil Zogar Sag managed to poison our water supply, and forty men died in one day. Many of the others are sick, or have been bitten by serpents or mauled by wild beasts which seem to swarm in increasing numbers in the vicinity of the fort. The soldiers believe Zogar's boast that he could summon the forest beasts to slay his

enemies.____'I have three hundred pikemen, four hundred Bossonian archers, and perhaps fifty men who, like yourself, are skilled in woodcraft. They are worth ten times their number of soldiers, but there are so few of them. Frankly, Conan, my situation is becoming precarious. The soldiers whisper of desertion; they are low-spirited, believing Zogar Sag has loosed devils on us. They fear the black plague with which he threatened us - the terrible black death of the swamplands. When I see a sick soldier I sweat with fear of seeing him turn black and shrivel and die before my eyes.____'Conan, if the plague is loosed upon us, the soldiers will desert in a body! The border will be left unguarded and nothing will check the sweep of the dark-skinned hordes to the very gates of Velitrium - maybe beyond! If we can not hold the fort, how can they hold the town?____'Conan, Zogar Sag must die, if we are to hold Conajohara. You have penetrated the unknown deeper than any other man in the fort; you know where Gwawela stands, and something of the forest trails across the river. Will you take a band of men tonight and endeavour to kill or capture him? Oh, I know it's mad. There isn't more than one chance in a thousand that any of you will come back alive. But if we don't get him, it's death for us all. You can take as many men as you wish.'____'A dozen men are better for a job like that than a regiment,' answered Conan. 'Five hundred men couldn't fight their way to Gwawela and back, but a dozen might slip in and out again. Let me pick my men. I don't want any soldiers.'____'Let me go!' eagerly exclaimed Balthus. 'I've hunted deer all my life on the Tauran.'____'All right. Valannus, we'll eat at the stall where the foresters gather, and I'll pick my men. We'll start within an hour, drop down the river in a boat to a point below the village and then steal upon it through the woods. If we live, we should be back by daybreak.'_____3 The Crawlers in the Dark_____The river was a vague trace between walls of ebony. The paddles that propelled the long boat creeping along in the dense shadow of the eastern bank dipped softly into the water, making no more noise than the beak of a heron. The broad shoulders of the man in front of Balthus were a blur in the dense gloom. He knew that not even the keen eyes of the man who knelt in the prow would discern anything more than a few feet ahead of them. Conan was feeling his way by instinct and an intensive familiarity with the river.____No one spoke. Balthus had had a good look at his companions in the fort before they slipped out of the stockade and down the bank into the waiting canoe. They were of a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier - men whom grim necessity had taught woodcraft. Aquilonians of the western provinces to a man, they had many points in common. They dressed alike - in buckskin boots, leathern breeks and deerskin shirts, with broad girdles that held axes and short swords; and they were all gaunt and scarred and hard-eyed; sinewy and taciturn.____They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger.____Balthus admired them and their leader and felt a pulse of pride that he was admitted into their company. He was proud that his paddle made no more noise than did theirs. In that respect at least he was their equal, though woodcraft learned in hunts on the Tauran could never equal that ground into the souls of men on the savage border.____Below the fort the river made a wide bend. The lights of the outpost were quickly lost, but the canoe held on its way for nearly a

mile, avoiding snags and floating logs with almost uncanny precision. Then a low grunt from their leader, and they swung its head about and glided toward the opposite shore. Emerging from the black shadows of the brush that fringed the bank and coming into the open of the midstream created a peculiar illusion of rash exposure. But the stars gave little light, and Balthus knew that unless one were watching for it, it would be all but impossible for the keenest eye to make out the shadowy shape of the canoe crossing the river. They swung in under the overhanging bushes of the western shore and Balthus groped for and found a projecting root which he grasped. No word was spoken. All instructions had been given before the scouting-party left the fort. As silently as a great panther Conan slid over the side and vanished in the bushes. Equally noiseless, nine men followed him. To Balthus, grasping the root with his paddle across his knee, it seemed incredible that ten men should thus fade into the tangled forest without a sound. He settled himself to wait. No word passed between him and the other man who had been left with him. Somewhere, a mile or so to the northwest, Zogar Sag's village stood girdled with thick woods. Balthus understood his orders; he and his companion were to wait for the return of the raiding-party. If Conan and his men had not returned by the first tinge of dawn, they were to race back up the river to the fort and report that the forest had again taken its immemorial toll of the invading race. The silence was oppressive. No sound came from the black woods, invisible beyond the ebony masses that were the overhanging bushes. Balthus no longer heard the drums. They had been silent for hours. He kept blinking, unconsciously trying to see through the deep gloom. The dank night-smells of the river and the damp forest oppressed him. Somewhere, near by, there was a sound as if a big fish had flopped and splashed the water. Balthus thought it must have leaped so close to the canoe that it had struck the side, for a slight quiver vibrated the craft. The boat's stern began to swing, slightly away from the shore. The man behind him must have let go of the projection he was gripping. Balthus twisted his head to hiss a warning, and could just make out the figure of his companion, a slightly blacker bulk in the blackness. The man did not reply. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, Balthus reached out and grasped his shoulder. To his amazement, the man crumpled under his touch and slumped down in the canoe. Twisting his body half about, Balthus groped for him, his heart shooting into his throat. His fumbling fingers slid over the man's throat - only the youth's convulsive clenching of his jaws choked back the cry that rose to his lips. His fingers encountered a gaping, oozing wound - his companion's throat had been cut from ear to ear. In that instant of horror and panic Balthus started up - and then a muscular arm out of the darkness locked fiercely about his throat, strangling his yell. The canoe rocked wildly. Balthus' knife was in his hand, though he did not remember jerking it out of his boot, and he stabbed fiercely and blindly. He felt the blade sink deep, and a fiendish yell rang in his ear, a yell that was horribly answered. The darkness seemed to come to life about him. A bestial clamor rose on all sides, and other arms grappled him. Borne under a mass of hurtling bodies the canoe rolled sidewise, but before he went under with it, something cracked against Balthus' head and the night was briefly illuminated by a blinding burst of fire before it gave way to a blackness where not even stars shone. 4 The Beasts of Zogar Sag Fires dazzled Balthus again as he slowly recovered his senses. He blinked, shook his head. Their glare hurt his eyes. A confused medley of sound rose about him, growing more distinct as his

senses cleared. He lifted his head and stared stupidly about him. Black figures hemmed him in, etched against crimson tongues of flame. Memory and understanding came in a rush. He was bound upright to a post in an open space, ringed by fierce and terrible figures. Beyond that ring fires burned, tended by naked, dark-skinned women. Beyond the fires he saw huts of mud and wattle, thatched with brush. Beyond the huts there was a stockade with a broad gate. But he saw these things only incidentally. Even the cryptic dark women with their curious coiffures were noted by him only absently. His full attention was fixed in awful fascination on the men who stood glaring at him. Short men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, they were naked except for scanty loin-clouts. The firelight brought out the play of their swelling muscles in bold relief. Their dark faces were immobile, but their narrow eyes glittered with the fire that burns in the eyes of a stalking tiger. Their tangled manes were bound back with bands of copper. Swords and axes were in their hands. Crude bandages banded the limbs of some, and smears of blood were dried on their dark skins. There had been fighting, recent and deadly. His eyes wavered away from the steady glare of his captors, and he repressed a cry of horror. A few feet away there rose a low, hideous pyramid: it was built of gory human heads. Dead eyes glared glassily up at the black sky. Numbly he recognized the countenances which were turned toward him. They were the heads of the men who had followed Conan into the forest. He could not tell if the Cimmerian's head were among them. Only a few faces were visible to him. It looked to him as if there must be ten or eleven heads at least. A deadly sickness assailed him. He fought a desire to retch. Beyond the heads lay the bodies of half a dozen Picts, and he was aware of a fierce exultation at the sight. The forest runners had taken toll, at least. Twisting his head away from the ghastly spectacle, he became aware that another post stood near him - a stake painted black as was the one to which he was bound. A man sagged in his bonds there, naked except for his leathern breeks, whom Balthus recognized as one of Conan's woodsmen. Blood trickled from his mouth, oozed sluggishly from a gash in his side. Lifting his head as he licked his livid lips, he muttered, making himself heard with difficulty above the fiendish clamor of the Picts: 'So they got you, too!' 'Sneaked up in the water and cut the other fellow's throat,' groaned Balthus. 'We never heard them till they were on us. Mitra, how can anything move so silently?' 'They're devils,' mumbled the frontiersman. 'They must have been watching us from the time we left midstream. We walked into a trap. Arrows from all sides were ripping into us before we knew it. Most of us dropped at the first fire. Three or four broke through the bushes and came to hand-grips. But there were too many. Conan might have gotten away. I haven't seen his head. Been better for you and me if they'd killed us outright. I can't blame Conan. Ordinarily we'd have gotten to the village without being discovered. They don't keep spies on the river bank as far down as we landed. We must have stumbled into a big party coming up the river from the south. Some devilment is up. Too many Picts here. These aren't all Gwaweli; men from the western tribes here and from up and down the river.' Balthus stared at the ferocious shapes. Little as he knew of Pictish ways, he was aware that the number of men clustered about them was out of proportion to the size of the village. There were not enough huts to have accommodated them all. Then he noticed that there was a difference in the barbaric tribal designs painted on their faces and breasts. 'Some kind of devilment,' muttered the forest runner. 'They might have gathered here to watch Zogar's magic-making. He'll make some rare magic with our

carcasses. Well, a border-man doesn't expect to die in bed. But I wish we'd gone out along with the rest.'___The wolfish howling of the Picts rose in volume and exultation, and from a movement in their ranks, an eager surging and crowding, Balthus deduced that someone of importance was coming. Twisting his head about, he saw that the stakes were set before a long building, larger than the other huts, decorated by human skulls dangling from the eaves. Through the door of that structure now danced a fantastic figure.___'Zogar!' muttered the woodsman, his bloody countenance set in wolfish lines as he unconsciously strained at his cords. Balthus saw a lean figure of middle height, almost hidden in ostrich plumes set on a harness of leather and copper. From amidst the plumes peered a hideous and malevolent face. The plumes puzzled Balthus. He knew their source lay half the width of a world to the south. They fluttered and rustled evilly as the shaman leaped and cavorted.___With fantastic bounds and prancings he entered the ring and whirled before his bound and silent captives. With another man it would have seemed ridiculous - a foolish savage prancing meaninglessly in a whirl of feathers. But that ferocious face glaring out from the billowing mass gave the scene a grim significance. No man with a face like that could seem ridiculous or like anything except the devil he was.___Suddenly he froze to statuesque stillness; the plumes rippled once and sank about him. The howling warriors fell silent. Zogar Sag stood erect and motionless, and he seemed to increase in height - to grow and expand. Balthus experienced the illusion that the Pict was towering above him, staring contemptuously down from a great height, though he knew the shaman was not as tall as himself. He shook off the illusion with difficulty.___The shaman was talking now, a harsh, guttural intonation that yet carried the hiss of a cobra. He thrust his head on his long neck toward the wounded man on the stake; his eyes shone red as blood in the firelight. The frontiersman spat full in his face.___With a fiendish howl Zogar bounded convulsively into the air, and the warriors gave tongue to a yell that shuddered up to the stars. They rushed toward the man on the stake, but the shaman beat them back. A snarled command sent men running to the gate. They hurled it open, turned and raced back to the circle. The ring of men split, divided with desperate haste to right and left. Balthus saw the women and naked children scurrying to the huts. They peeked out of doors and windows. A broad lane was left to the open gate, beyond which loomed the black forest, crowding sullenly in upon the clearing, unlighted by the fires.___A tense silence reigned as Zogar Sag turned toward the forest, raised on his tiptoes and sent a weird inhuman call shuddering out into the night. Somewhere, far out in the black forest, a deeper cry answered him. Balthus shuddered. From the timbre of that cry he knew it never came from a human throat. He remembered what Valannus had said - that Zogar boasted that he could summon wild beasts to do his bidding. The woodsman was livid beneath his mask of blood. He licked his lips spasmodically.___The village held its breath. Zogar Sag stood still as a statue, his plumes trembling faintly about him. But suddenly the gate was no longer empty.___A shuddering gasp swept over the village and men crowded hastily back, jamming one another between the huts. Balthus felt the short hair stir on his scalp. The creature that stood in the gate was like the embodiment of nightmare legend. Its color was of a curious pale quality which made it seem ghostly and unreal in the dim light. But there was nothing unreal about the low-hung savage head, and the great curved fangs that glistened in the firelight. On noiseless padded feet it approached like a phantom out of the past. It was a survival of an older, grimmer age, the ogre of many an ancient legend -

a saber-tooth tiger. No Hyborian hunter had looked upon one of those primordial brutes for centuries. Immemorial myths lent the creatures a supernatural quality, induced by their ghostly color and their fiendish ferocity.____The beast that glided toward the men on the stakes was longer and heavier than a common, striped tiger, almost as bulky as a bear. Its shoulders and forelegs were so massive and mightily muscled as to give it a curiously top-heavy look, though its hind-quarters were more powerful than that of a lion. Its jaws were massive, but its head was brutishly shaped. Its brain capacity was small. It had room for no instincts except those of destruction. It was a freak of carnivorous development, evolution run amuck in a horror of fangs and talons.____This was the monstrosity Zogar Sag had summoned out of the forest. Balthus no longer doubted the actuality of the shaman's magic. Only the black arts could establish a domination over that tiny-brained, mighty-thewed monster. Like a whisper at the back of his consciousness rose the vague memory of the name of an ancient god of darkness and primordial fear, to whom once both men and beasts bowed and whose children - men whispered - still lurked in dark corners of the world. New horror tinged the glare he fixed on Zogar Sag.____The monster moved past the heap of bodies and the pile of gory heads without appearing to notice them. He was no scavenger. He hunted only the living, in a life dedicated solely to slaughter. An awful hunger burned greenly in the wide, unwinking eyes; the hunger not alone of belly-emptiness, but the lust of death-dealing. His gaping jaws slavered. The shaman stepped back; his hand waved toward the woodsman.____The great cat sank into a crouch, and Balthus numbly remembered tales of its appalling ferocity: of how it would spring upon an elephant and drive its sword-like fangs so deeply into the titan's skull that they could never be withdrawn, but would keep it nailed to its victim, to die by starvation. The shaman cried out shrilly, and with an ear-shattering roar the monster sprang.____Balthus had never dreamed of such a spring, such a hurtling of incarnated destruction embodied in that giant bulk of iron thews and ripping talons. Full on the woodsman's breast it struck, and the stake splintered and snapped at the base, crashing to the earth under the impact. Then the saber-tooth was gliding toward the gate, half dragging, half carrying a hideous crimson hulk that only faintly resembled a man. Balthus glared almost paralysed, his brain refusing to credit what his eyes had seen.____In that leap the great beast had not only broken off the stake, it had ripped the mangled body of its victim from the post to which it was bound. The huge talons in that instant of contact had disemboweled and partially dismembered the man, and the giant fangs had torn away the whole top of his head, shearing through the skull as easily as through flesh. Stout rawhide thongs had given way like paper; where the thongs had held, flesh and bones had not. Balthus retched suddenly. He had hunted bears and panthers, but he had never dreamed the beast lived which could make such a red ruin of a human frame in the flicker of an instant.____The saber-tooth vanished through the gate, and a few moments later a deep roar sounded through the forest, receding in the distance. But the Picts still shrank back against the huts, and the shaman still stood facing the gate that was like a black opening to let in the night.____Cold sweat burst suddenly out on Balthus' skin. What new horror would come through that gate to make carrion-meat of his body? Sick panic assailed him and he strained futilely at his thongs. The night pressed in very black and horrible outside the firelight. The fires themselves glowed lurid as the fires of hell. He felt the eyes of the Picts upon him - hundreds of hungry, cruel eyes that reflected the

lust of souls utterly without humanity as he knew it. They no longer seemed men; they were devils of this black jungle, as inhuman as the creatures to which the fiend in the nodding plumes screamed through the darkness. ___Zogar sent another call shuddering through the night, and it was utterly unlike the first cry. There was a hideous sibilance in it - Balthus turned cold at the implication. If a serpent could hiss that loud, it would make just such a sound. ___This time there was no answer - only a period of breathless silence in which the pound of Balthus' heart strangled him; and then there sounded a swishing outside the gate, a dry rustling that sent chills down Balthus' spine. Again the firelit gate held a hideous occupant. ___Again Balthus recognized the monster from ancient legends. He saw and knew the ancient and evil serpent which swayed there, its wedge-shaped head, huge as that of a horse, as high as a tall man's head, and its palely gleaming barrel rippling out behind it. A forked tongue darted in and out, and the firelight glittered on bared fangs. ___Balthus became incapable of emotion. The horror of his fate paralysed him. That was the reptile that the ancients called Ghost Snake, the pale, abominable terror that of old glided into huts by night to devour whole families. Like the python it crushed its victim, but unlike other constrictors its fangs bore venom that carried madness and death. It too had long been considered extinct. But Valannus had spoken truly. No white man knew what shapes haunted the great forests beyond Black River. ___It came on silently rippling over the ground, its hideous head on the same level, its neck curving back slightly for the stroke. Balthus gazed with glazed, hypnotized stare into that loathe-some gullet down which he would soon be engulfed, and he was aware of no sensation except a vague nausea. ___And then something that glinted in the firelight streaked from the shadows of the huts, and the great reptile whipped about and went into instant convulsions. As in a dream Balthus saw a short throwing-spear transfixing the mighty neck, just below the gaping jaws; the shaft protruded from one side, the steel head from the other. ___Knotting and looping hideously, the maddened reptile rolled into the circle of men who strove back from him. The spear had not severed its spine, but merely transfixed its great neck muscles. Its furiously lashing tail mowed down a dozen men and its jaws snapped convulsively, splashing others with venom that burned like liquid fire. Howling, cursing, screaming, frantic, they scattered before it, knocking each other down in their flight, trampling the fallen, bursting through the huts. The giant snake rolled into a fire, scattering sparks and brands, and the pain lashed it to more frenzied efforts. A hut wall buckled under the ram-like impact of its flailing tail, disgorging howling people. ___Men stampeded through the fires, knocking the logs right and left. The flames sprang up, then sank. A reddish dim glow was all that lighted that nightmare scene where the giant reptile whipped and rolled, and men clawed and shrieked in frantic flight. ___Balthus felt something jerk at his wrists, and then, miraculously, he was free, and a strong hand dragged him behind the post. Dazedly he saw Conan, felt the forest man's iron grip on his arm. ___There was blood on the Cimmerian's mail, dried blood on the sword in his right hand; he loomed dim and gigantic in the shadowy light. ___'Come on! Before they get over their panic!' ___Balthus felt the haft of an ax shoved into his hand. Zogar Sag had disappeared. Conan dragged Balthus after him until the youth's numb brain awoke, and his legs began to move of their own accord. Then Conan released him and ran into the building where the skulls hung. Balthus followed him. He got a glimpse of a grim stone altar, faintly lighted by the glow

outside; five human heads grinned on that altar, and there was a grisly familiarity about the features of the freshest; it was the head of the merchant Tiberias. Behind the altar was an idol, dim, indistinct, bestial, yet vaguely man-like in outline. Then fresh horror choked Balthus as the shape heaved up suddenly with a rattle of chains, lifting long misshapen arms in the gloom.____Conan's sword flailed down, crunching through flesh and bone, and then the Cimmerian was dragging Balthus around the altar, past a huddled shaggy bulk on the floor, to a door at the back of the long hut. Through this they burst, out into the enclosure again. But a few yards beyond them loomed the stockade.____It was dark behind the altar-hut. The mad stampede of the Picts had not carried them in that direction. At the wall Conan halted, gripped Balthus and heaved him at arm's length into the air as he might have lifted a child. Balthus grasped the points of the upright logs set in the sun-dried mud and scrambled up on them, ignoring the havoc done his skin. He lowered a hand to the Cimmerian, when around a corner of the altar-hut sprang a fleeing Pict. He halted short, glimpsing the man on the wall in the faint glow of the fires. Conan hurled his ax with deadly aim, but the warrior's mouth was already open for a yell of warning, and it rang loud above the din, cut short as he dropped with a shattered skull.____Blinding terror had not submerged all ingrained instincts. As that wild yell rose above the clamor, there was an instant's lull, and then a hundred throats bayed ferocious answer and warriors came leaping to repel the attack presaged by the warning.____Conan leaped high, caught, not Balthus' hand but his arm near the shoulder, and swung himself up. Balthus set his teeth against the strain, and then the Cimmerian was on the wall beside him, and the fugitives dropped down on the other side._____5 The Children of Jhebbal Sag_____ 'Which way is the river?' Balthus was confused.____ 'We don't dare try for the river now,' grunted Conan. 'The woods between the village and the river are swarming with warriors. Come on! We'll head in the last direction they'll expect us to go - west!'____ Looking back as they entered the thick growth, Balthus beheld the wall dotted with black heads as the savages peered over. The Picts were bewildered. They had not gained the wall in time to see the fugitives take cover. They had rushed to the wall expecting to repel an attack in force. They had seen the body of the dead warrior. But no enemy was in sight.____ Balthus realized that they did not yet know their prisoner had escaped. From other sounds he believed that the warriors, directed by the shrill voice of Zogar Sag, were destroying the wounded serpent with arrows. The monster was out of the shaman's control. A moment later the quality of the yells was altered. Screeches of rage rose in the night.____ Conan laughed grimly. He was leading Balthus along a narrow trail that ran west under the black branches, stepping as swiftly and surely as if he trod a well-lighted thoroughfare. Balthus stumbled after him, guiding himself by feeling the dense wall on either hand.____ 'They'll be after us now. Zogar's discovered you're gone, and he knows my head wasn't in the pile before the altar-hut. The dog! If I'd had another spear I'd have thrown it through him before I struck the snake. Keep to die trail. They can't track us by torchlight, and there are a score of paths leading from the village. They'll follow those leading to the river first - throw a cordon of warriors for miles along the bank, expecting us to try to break through. We won't take to the woods until we have to. We can make better time on this trail. Now buckle down to it and run as you never ran before.'____ 'They got over their panic cursed quick!' panted Balthus, complying with a fresh burst of speed.____ 'They're not afraid of anything, very long,' grunted

Conan. ___For a space nothing was said between them. The fugitives devoted all their attention to covering distance. They were plunging deeper and deeper into the wilderness and getting farther away from civilization at every step, but Balthus did not question Conan's wisdom. The Cimmerian presently took time to grunt: 'When we're far enough away from the village we'll swing back to the river in a big circle. No other village within miles of Gwawela. All the Picts are gathered in that vicinity. We'll circle wide around them. They can't track us until daylight. They'll pick up our path then, but before dawn we'll leave the trail and take to the woods.' ___They plunged on. The yells died out behind them. Balthus' breath was whistling through his teeth. He felt a pain in his side, and running became torture. He blundered against the bushes on each side of the trail. Conan pulled up suddenly, turned and stared back down the dim path. ___Somewhere the moon was rising, a dim white glow amidst a tangle of branches. ___'Shall we take to the woods?' panted Balthus. ___'Give me your ax,' murmured Conan softly. 'Something is close behind us.' ___'Then we'd better leave the trail!' exclaimed Balthus. ___Conan shook his head and drew his companion into a dense thicket. The moon rose higher, making a dim light in the path. ___'We can't fight the whole tribe!' whispered Balthus. ___'No human being could have found our trail so quickly, or followed us so swiftly,' muttered Conan. 'Keep silent.' ___There followed a tense silence in which Balthus felt that his heart could be heard pounding for miles away. Then abruptly, without a sound to announce its coming, a savage head appeared in the dim path. Balthus' heart jumped into his throat; at first glance he feared to look upon the awful head of the saber-tooth. But this head was smaller, more narrow; it was a leopard which stood there, snarling silently and glaring down the trail. What wind there was was blowing toward the hiding men, concealing their scent. The beast lowered his head and snuffed the trail, then moved forward uncertainly. A chill played down Balthus' spine. The brute was undoubtedly trailing them. ___And it was suspicious. It lifted its head, its eyes glowing like balls of fire, and growled low in its throat. And at that instant Conan hurled the ax. ___All the weight of arm and shoulder was behind the throw, and the ax was a streak of silver in the dim moon. Almost before he realized what had happened, Balthus saw the leopard rolling on the ground in its death-throes, the handle of the ax standing up from its head. The head of the weapon had split its narrow skull. ___Conan bounded from the bushes, wrenched his ax free and dragged the limp body in among the trees, concealing it from the casual glance. ___'Now let's go, and go fast!' he grunted, leading the way southward, away from the trail. 'There'll be warriors coming after that cat. As soon as he got his wits back Zogar sent him after us. The Picts would follow him, but he'd leave them far behind. He'd circle the village until he hit our trail and then come after us like a streak. They couldn't keep up with him, but they'll have an idea as to our general direction. They'd follow, listening for his cry. Well, they won't hear that, but they'll find the blood on the trail, and look around and find the body in the brush. They'll pick up our spoor there, if they can. Walk with care.' ___He avoided clinging briars and low-hanging branches effortlessly, gliding between trees without touching the stems and always planting his feet in the places calculated to show least evidence of his passing; but with Balthus it was slower, more laborious work. ___No sound came from behind them. They had covered more than a mile when Balthus said: 'Does Zogar Sag catch leopard-cubs and train them for bloodhounds?' ___Conan shook his head. 'That was a leopard he called out of the

woods.'___'But,' Balthus persisted, 'if he can order the beasts to do his bidding, why doesn't he rouse them all and have them after us? The forest is full of leopards; why send only one after us?'___Conan did not reply for a space, and when he did it was with a curious reticence.'___'He can't command all the animals. Only such as remember Jhebbal Sag.'___'Jhebbal Sag?' Balthus repeated the ancient name hesitantly. He had never heard it spoken more than three or four times in his whole life.'___'Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who remember are brothers and speak the same tongue.'___Balthus did not reply; he had strained at a Pictish stake and seen the nighted jungle give up its fanged horrors at a shaman's call.'___'Civilized men laugh,' said Conan. 'But not one can -tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it.'___The people on the Tauran were closer to the primitive than most Aquilonians; superstitions persisted, whose sources were lost in antiquity. And Balthus had seen that which still prickled his flesh. He could not refute the monstrous thing which Conan's words implied.'___'I've heard that there's an ancient grove sacred to Jhebbal Sag somewhere in this forest,' said Conan. 'I don't know. I've never seen it. But more beasts remember in this country than any I've ever seen.'___'Then others will be on our trail?'___'They are now,' was Conan's disquieting answer. 'Zogar would never leave our tracking to one beast alone.'___'What are we to do, then?' asked Balthus uneasily, grasping his ax as he stared at the gloomy arches above him. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of ripping talons and fangs leaping from the shadows. 'Wait!_'___Conan turned, squatted and with his knife began scratching a curious symbol in the mold. Stooping to look at it over his shoulder, Balthus felt a crawling of the flesh along his spine, he knew not why. He felt no wind against his face, but there was a rustling of leaves above them and a weird moaning swept ghostily through the branches. Conan glanced up inscrutably, then rose and stood staring somberly down at the symbol he had drawn.'___'What is it?' whispered Balthus. It looked archaic and meaningless to him. He supposed that it was his ignorance of artistry which prevented his identifying it as one of the conventional designs of some prevailing culture. But had he been the most erudite artist in the world, he would have been no nearer the solution.'___'I saw it carved in the rock of a cave no human had visited for a million years,' muttered Conan, 'in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless river. He told me part of its meaning - it's sacred to Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him. Watch!_'___They drew back among the dense foliage some yards away and waited in tense silence. To the east drums muttered and somewhere to north and west other drums answered. Balthus shivered, though he knew long miles of black forest separated him from the grim beaters of those drums whose dull pulsing was a sinister overture that set the dark stage for bloody drama.'___Balthus found himself holding his breath. Then with a slight shaking of the leaves, the bushes parted and a magnificent panther came into view. The moonlight dappling through the leaves shone on its glossy coat rippling with the play of the great muscles beneath it.'___With its head held low it glided toward them. It was smelling out

their trail. Then it halted as if frozen, its muzzle almost touching the symbol cut in the mold. For a long space it crouched motionless; it flattened its long body and laid its head on the ground before the mark. And Balthus felt the short hairs stir on his scalp. For the attitude of the great carnivore was one of awe and adoration.____Then the panther rose and backed away carefully, belly almost to the ground. With his hind-quarters among the bushes he wheeled as if in sudden panic and was gone like a flash of dappled light.____Balthus mopped his brow with a trembling hand and glanced at Conan.____The barbarian's eyes were smoldering with fires that never lit the eyes of men bred to the ideas of civilization. In that instant he was all wild, and had forgotten the man at his side. In his burning gaze Balthus glimpsed and vaguely recognized pristine images and half-embodied memories, shadows from Life's dawn, forgotten and repudiated by sophisticated races - ancient, primeval fantasms unnamed and nameless.____Then the deeper fires were masked and Conan was silently leading the way deeper into the forest.____'We've no more to fear from the beasts,' he said after a while, 'but we've left a sign for men to read. They won't follow our trail very easily, and until they find that symbol they won't know for sure we've turned south. Even then it won't be easy to smell us out without the beasts to aid them. But the woods south of the trail will be full of warriors looking for us. If we keep moving after daylight, we'll be sure to run into some of them. As soon as we find a good place we'll hide and wait until another night to swing back and make the river. We've got to warn Valannus, but it won't help him any if we get ourselves killed.'____'Warn Valannus?'____'Hell, the woods along the river are swarming with Picts! That's why they got us. Zogar's brewing war-magic; no mere raid this time. He's done something no Pict has done in my memory - united as many as fifteen or sixteen clans. His magic did it; they'll follow a wizard farther than they will a war-chief. You saw the mob in the village; and there were hundreds hiding along the river bank that you didn't see. More coming, from the farther villages. He'll have at least three thousand fighting-men. I lay in the bushes and heard their talk as they went past. They mean to attack the fort; when, I don't know, but Zogar doesn't dare delay long. He's gathered them and whipped them into a frenzy. If he doesn't lead them into battle quickly, they'll fall to quarreling with one another. They're like blood-mad tigers.____'I don't know whether they can take the fort or not. Anyway, we've got to get back across the river and give the warning. The settlers on the Velitrium road must either get into the fort or back to Velitrium. While the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will range the road far to the east - might even cross Thunder River and raid the thickly settled country behind Velitrium.'____As he talked he was leading the way deeper and deeper into the ancient wilderness. Presently he grunted with satisfaction.____They had reached a spot where the underbrush was more scattered, and an outcropping of stone was visible, wandering off southward. Balthus felt more secure as they followed it. Not even a Pict could trail them over naked rock.____'How did you get away?' he asked presently.____Conan tapped his mail-shirt and helmet.____'If more borderers would wear harness there'd be fewer skulls hanging on the altar-huts. But most men make noise if they wear armor. They were waiting on each side of the path, without moving. And when a Pict stands motionless, the very beasts of the forest pass him without seeing him. They'd seen us crossing the river and got in their places. If they'd gone into ambush after we left the bank, I'd have had some hint of it. But they were waiting, and not even a leaf trembled. The devil himself couldn't have suspected anything.

The first suspicion I had was when I heard a shaft rasp against a bow as it was pulled back. I dropped and yelled for the men behind me to drop, but they were too slow, taken by surprise like that.____'Most of them fell at the first volley that raked us from both sides. Some of the arrows crossed the trail and struck Picts on the other side. I heard them howl.' He grinned with vicious satisfaction. 'Such of us as were left plunged into the woods and closed with them. When I saw the others were all down or taken, I broke through and outfooted the painted devils through the darkness. They were all around me. I ran and crawled and sneaked, and sometimes I lay on my belly under the bushes while they passed me on all sides.____'I tried for the shore and found it lined with them, waiting for just such a move. But I'd have cut my way through and taken a chance on swimming, only I heard the drums pounding in the village and knew they'd taken somebody alive.____'They were all so engrossed in Zogar's magic that I was able to climb the wall behind the altar-hut. There was a warrior supposed to be watching at that point, but he was squatting behind the hut and peering around the corner at the ceremony. I came up behind him and broke his neck with my hands before he knew what was happening. It was his spear I threw into the snake, and that's his ax you're carrying.'____'But what was that - that thing you killed in the altar-hut?' asked Balthus, with a shiver at the memory of the dim-seen horror.____'One of Zogar's gods. One of Jhebbal's children that didn't remember and had to be kept chained to the altar. A bull ape. The Picts think they're sacred to the Hairy One who lives on the moon - the gorilla-god of Gullah.____'It's getting light. Here's a good place to hide until we see how close they're on our trail. Probably have to wait until night to break back to the river.'____A low hill pitched upward, girdled and covered with thick trees and bushes. Near the crest Conan slid into a tangle of jutting rocks, crowned by dense bushes. Lying among them they could see the jungle below without being seen. It was a good place to hide or defend. Balthus did not believe that even a Pict could have trailed them over the rocky ground for the past four or five miles, but he was afraid of the beasts that obeyed Zogar Sag. His faith in the curious symbol wavered a little now. But Conan had dismissed the possibility of beasts tracking them.____A ghostly whiteness spread through the dense branches; the patches of sky visible altered in hue, grew from pink to blue. Balthus felt the gnawing of hunger, though he had slaked his thirst at a stream they had skirted. There was complete silence, except for an occasional chirp of a bird. The drums were no longer to be heard. Balthus' thoughts reverted to the grim scene before the altar-hut.____'Those were ostrich plumes Zogar Sag wore,' he said. 'I've seen them on the helmets of knights who rode from the East to visit the barons of the marches. There are no ostriches in this forest, are there?'____'They came from Kush,' answered Conan. 'West of here, many marches, lies the seashore. Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal tribes for skins and copper ore and gold dust. Sometimes they trade ostrich plumes they got from the Stygians, who in turn got them from the black tribes of Kush, which lies south of Stygia. The Pictish shamans place great store by them. But there's much risk in such trade. The Picts are too likely to try to seize the ship. And the coast is dangerous to ships. I've sailed along it when I was with the pirates of the Barachan Isles, which lie southwest of Zingara.'____Balthus looked at his companion with admiration.____'I knew you hadn't spent your life on this frontier. You've mentioned several far places. You've traveled widely?'____'I've roamed far; farther than any other man of my race ever wandered. I've

seen all the great cities of the Hyborians, the Shemites, the Stygians and the Hyrkanians. I've roamed in the unknown countries south of the black kingdoms of Kush, and east of the Sea of Vilayet. I've been a mercenary captain, a corsair, a kozak, a penniless vagabond, a general - hell, I've been everything except a king, and I may be that, before I die.' The fancy pleased him, and he grinned hardly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and stretched his mighty figure on the rocks. 'This is as good a life as any. I don't know how long I'll stay on the frontier; a week, a month, a year. I have a roving foot. But it's as well on the border as anywhere.'___Balthus set himself to watch the forest below them. Momentarily he expected to see fierce painted faces thrust through the leaves. But as the hours passed no stealthy footfall disturbed the brooding quiet. Balthus believed the Picts had missed their trail and given up the chase. Conan grew restless.___'We should have sighted parties scouring the woods for us. If they've quit the chase, it's because they're after bigger game. They may be gathering to cross the river and storm the fort.'___'Would they come this far south if they lost the trail?'___'They've lost the trail, all right; otherwise they'd have been on our necks before now. Under ordinary circumstances they'd scour the woods for miles in every direction. Some of them should have passed within sight of this hill. They must be preparing to cross the river. We've got to take a chance and make for the river.'___Creeping down the rocks Balthus felt his flesh crawl between his shoulders as he momentarily expected a withering blast of arrows from the green masses about them. He feared that the Picts had discovered them and were lying about in ambush. But Conan was convinced no enemies were near, and the Cimmerian was right.___'We're miles to the south of the village,' grunted Conan.___'We'll hit straight through for the river. I don't know how far down the river they've spread. We'll hope to hit it below them.'___With haste that seemed reckless to Balthus they hurried eastward. The woods seemed empty of life. Conan believed that all the Picts were gathered in the vicinity of Gwawela, if indeed, they had not already crossed the river. He did not believe they would cross in the daytime, however.___'Some woodsman would be sure to see them and give the alarm. They'll cross above and below the fort, out of sight of the sentries. Then others will get in canoes and make straight across for the river wall. As soon as they attack, those hidden in the woods on the east shore will assail the fort from the other sides. They've tried that before, and got the guts shot and hacked out of them. But this time they've got enough men to make a real onslaught of it.'___They pushed on without pausing, though Balthus gazed longingly at the squirrels flitting among the branches, which he could have brought down with a cast of his ax. With a sigh he drew up his broad belt. The everlasting silence and gloom of the primitive forest was beginning to depress him. He found himself thinking of the open groves and sun-dappled meadows of the Tauran, of the bluff cheer of his father's steep-thatched, diamond-paned house, of the fat cows browsing through the deep, lush grass, and the hearty fellowship of the brawny, bare-armed plowmen and herdsmen.___He felt lonely, in spite of his companion. Conan was as much a part of this wilderness as Balthus was alien to it. The Cimmerian might have spent years among the great cities of the world; he might have walked with the rulers of civilization; he might even achieve his wild whim some day and rule as king of a civilized nation; stranger things had happened. But he was no less a barbarian. He was concerned only with the naked fundamentals of life. The warm intimacies of small, kindly things, the sentiments and delicious trivialities that make up so much of civilized men's lives

were meaningless to him. A wolf was no less a wolf because a whim of chance caused him to run with the watchdogs. Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.____The shadows were lengthening when they reached the river and peered through the masking bushes. They could see up and down the river for about a mile each way. The sullen stream lay bare and empty. Conan scowled across at the other shore.____'We've got to take another chance here. We've got to swim the river. We don't know whether they've crossed or not. The woods over there may be alive with them. We've got to risk it. We're about six miles south of Gwawela.'____He wheeled and ducked as a bow-string twanged. Something like a white flash of light streaked through the bushes. Balthus knew it was an arrow. Then with a tigerish bound Conan was through the bushes. Balthus caught the gleam of steel as he whirled his sword, and heard a death scream. The next instant he had broken through the bushes after the Cimmerian.____A Pict with a shattered skull lay face-down on the ground, his fingers spasmodically clawing at the grass. Half a dozen others were swarming about Conan, swords and axes lifted. They had cast away their bows, useless at such deadly close quarters. Their lower jaws were painted white, contrasting vividly with their dark faces, and the designs on their muscular breasts differed from any Balthus had ever seen.____One of them hurled his ax at Balthus and rushed after it with lifted knife. Balthus ducked and then caught the wrist that drove the knife licking at his throat. They went to the ground together, rolling over and over. The Pict was like a wild beast, his muscles hard as steel strings.____Balthus was striving to maintain his hold on the wild man's wrist and bring his own ax into play, but so fast and furious was the struggle that each attempt to strike was blocked. The Pict was wrenching furiously to free his knife hand, was clutching at Balthus' ax, and driving his knees at the youth's groin. Suddenly he attempted to shift his knife to his free hand, and in that instant Balthus, struggling up on one knee, split the painted head with a desperate blow of his ax.____He sprang up and glared wildly about for his companion, expecting to see him overwhelmed by numbers. Then he realized the full strength and ferocity of the Cimmerian. Conan bestrode two of his attackers, shorn half asunder by that terrible broadsword. As Balthus looked he saw the Cimmerian beat down a thrusting shortsword, avoid the stroke of an ax with a cat-like sidewise spring which brought him within arm's length of a squat savage stooping for a bow. Before the Pict could straighten, the red sword flailed down and clove him from shoulder to mid-breastbone, where the blade stuck. The remaining warriors rushed in, one from either side. Balthus hurled his ax with an accuracy that reduced the attackers to one, and Conan, abandoning his efforts to free his sword, wheeled and met the remaining Pict with his bare hands. The stocky warrior, a head shorter than his tall enemy, leaped in, striking with his ax, at the same rime stabbing murderously with his knife. The knife broke on the Cimmerian's mail, and the ax checked in midair as Conan's fingers locked like iron on the descending arm. A bone snapped loudly, and Balthus saw the Pict wince and falter. The next instant he was swept off his feet, lifted high above the Cimmerian's head - he writhed in midair for an instant, kicking and thrashing, and then was dashed headlong to the earth with such force that he rebounded, and then lay still, his limp posture telling of splintered limbs and a broken spine.____'Come on!' Conan wrenched his sword free and snatched up an ax. 'Grab a bow and a handful of arrows, and hurry! We've got to trust

to our heels again. That yell was heard. They'll be here in no time. If we tried to swim now, they'd feather us with arrows before we reached midstream!'_____6 Red Axes of the Border_____Conan did not plunge deeply into the forest. A few hundred yards from the river, he altered his slanting course and ran parallel with it. Balthus recognized a grim determination not to be hunted away from the river which they must cross if they_____were to warn the men in the fort. Behind them rose more loudly the yells of the forest men. Balthus believed the Picts had reached the glade where the bodies of the slain men lay. Then further yells seemed to indicate that the savages were streaming into the woods in pursuit. They had left a trail any Pict could follow._____Conan increased his speed, and Balthus grimly set his teeth and kept on his heels, though he felt he might collapse any time. It seemed centuries since he had eaten last. He kept going more by an effort of will than anything else. His blood was pounding so furiously in his ear-drums that he was not aware when the yells died out behind them._____Conan halted suddenly. Balthus leaned against a tree and panted._____ 'They've quit!' grunted the Cimmerian, scowling._____ 'Sneaking - up - on - us!' gasped Balthus._____ Conan shook his head._____ 'A short chase like this they'd yell every step of the way. No. They've gone back. I thought I heard somebody yelling behind them a few seconds before the noise began to get dimmer. They've been recalled. And that's good for us, but damned bad for the men in the fort. It means the warriors are being summoned out of the woods for the attack. These men we ran into were warriors from a tribe down the river. They were undoubtedly headed for Gwawela to join in the assault on the fort. Damn it, we're farther away than ever, now. We've got to get across the river.'_____Turning east he hurried through the thickets with no attempt at concealment. Balthus followed him, for the first time feeling the sting of lacerations on his breast and shoulder where the Pict's savage teeth had scored him. He was pushing through the thick bushes that fringed the bank when Conan pulled him back. Then he heard a rhythmic splashing, and peering through the leaves, saw a dugout canoe coming up the river, its single occupant paddling hard against the current. He was a strongly built Pict with a white heron feather thrust in a copper band that confined his square-cut mane._____ 'That's a Gwawela man,' muttered Conan. 'Emissary from Zogar. White plume shows that. He's carried a peace talk to the tribes down the river and now he's trying to get back and take a hand in the slaughter.'_____The lone ambassador was now almost even with their hiding-place, and suddenly Balthus almost jumped out of his skin. At his very ear had sounded the harsh gutturals of a Pict. Then he realized that Conan had called to the paddler in his own tongue. The man started, scanned the bushes and called back something, then cast a startled glance across the river, bent low and sent the canoe shooting in toward the western bank. Not understanding, Balthus saw Conan take from his hand the bow he had picked up in the glade, and notch an arrow._____The Pict had run his canoe in close to the shore, and staring up into the bushes, called out something. His answer came in the twang of the bow-string, the streaking flight of the arrow that sank to the feathers in his broad breast. With a choking gasp he slumped sidewise and rolled into the shallow water. In an instant Conan was down the bank and wading into the water to grasp the drifting canoe. Balthus stumbled after him and somewhat dazedly crawled into the canoe. Conan scrambled in, seized the paddle and sent the craft shooting toward the eastern shore. Balthus noted with envious admiration the play of the great muscles beneath the sun-burnt skin. The Cimmerian seemed an iron man, who never knew

fatigue. ___ 'What did you say to the Pict?' asked Balthus. ___ 'Told him to pull into shore; said there was a white forest runner on the bank who was trying to get a shot at him.' ___ 'That doesn't seem fair,' Balthus objected. 'He thought a friend was speaking to him. You mimicked a Pict perfectly?' ___ 'We needed his boat,' grunted Conan, not pausing in his exertions. 'Only way to lure him to the bank. Which is worse - to betray a Pict who'd enjoy skinning us both alive, or betray the men across the river whose lives depend on our getting over?' ___ Balthus mulled over this delicate ethical question for a moment, then shrugged his shoulder and asked: 'How far are we from the fort?' ___ Conan pointed to a creek which flowed into Black River from the east, a few hundred yards below them. ___ 'That's South Creek; it's ten miles from its mouth to the fort. It's the southern boundary of Conajohara. Marshes miles wide south of it. No danger of a raid from across them. Nine miles above the fort North Creek forms the other boundary. Marshes beyond that, too. That's why an attack must come from the west, across Black River. Conajohara's just like a spear, with a point nineteen miles wide, thrust into the Pictish wilderness.' ___ 'Why don't we keep to the canoe and make the trip by water?' ___ 'Because, considering the current we've got to brace, and the bends in the river, we can go faster afoot. Besides, remember Gwawela is south of the fort; if the Picts are crossing the river we'd run right into them.' ___ Dusk was gathering as they stepped upon the eastern bank. Without pause Conan pushed on northward, at a pace that made Balthus' sturdy legs ache. ___ 'Valannus wanted a fort built at the mouths of North and South Creeks,' grunted the Cimmerian. 'Then the river could be patrolled constantly. But the Government wouldn't do it.' ___ 'Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees - I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy -hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of the Eastern cities!' ___ A week before, Balthus would have laughed at any such preposterous suggestion. Now he made no reply. He had seen the unconquerable ferocity of the men who dwelt beyond the frontiers. ___ He shivered, casting glances at the sullen river, just visible through the bushes, at the arches of the trees which crowded close to its banks. He kept remembering that the Picts might have crossed the river and be lying in ambush between them and the fort. It was fast growing dark. ___ A slight sound ahead of them jumped his heart into his throat, and Conan's sword gleamed in the air. He lowered it when a dog, a great, gaunt, scarred beast, slunk out of the bushes and stood staring at them. ___ 'That dog belonged to a settler who tried to build his cabin on the bank of the river a few miles south of the fort,' grunted Conan. 'The Picts slipped over and killed him, of course, and burned his cabin. We found him dead among the embers, and the dog lying senseless among three Picts he'd killed. He was almost cut to pieces. We took him to the fort and dressed his wounds, but after he recovered he took to the woods and turned wild - What now, Slasher, are you hunting the men who killed your master?' ___ The massive head swung from side to side and the eyes glowed greenly. He did not growl or bark. Silently as a phantom he slid in behind them. ___ 'Let him come,' muttered Conan. 'He can smell the devils before we can see them.' ___ Balthus smiled and laid his hand caressingly on the dog's head. The lips involuntarily writhed back to display the gleaming fangs; then the great beast bent his head

sheepishly, and his tail moved with jerky uncertainty, as if the owner had almost forgotten the emotions of friendliness. Balthus mentally compared the great gaunt hard body with the fat sleek hounds tumbling vociferously over one another in his father's kennel yard. He sighed. The frontier was no less hard for beasts than for men. This dog had almost forgotten the meaning of kindness and friendliness. ___Slasher glided ahead, and Conan let him take the lead. The last tinge of dusk faded into stark darkness. The miles fell away under their steady feet. Slasher seemed voiceless. Suddenly he halted, tense, ears lifted. An instant later the men heard it - a demoniac yelling up the river ahead of them, faint as a whisper. ___Conan swore like a madman. ___'They've attacked the fort! We're too late! Come on!' ___He increased his pace, trusting to the dog to smell out ambushes ahead. In a flood of tense excitement Balthus forgot his hunger and weariness. The yells grew louder as they advanced, and above the devilish screaming they could hear the deep shouts of the soldiers. Just as Balthus began to fear they would run into the savages who seemed to be howling just ahead of them, Conan swung away from the river in a wide semicircle that carried them to a low rise from which they could look over the forest. They saw the fort, lighted with torches thrust over the parapets on long poles. These cast a flickering, uncertain light over the clearing, and in that light they saw throngs of naked, painted figures along the fringe of the clearing. The river swarmed with canoes. The Picts had the fort completely surrounded. ___An incessant hail of arrows rained against the stockade from the woods and the river. The deep twanging of the bow-strings rose above the howling. Yelling like wolves, several hundred naked warriors with axes in their hands ran from under the trees and raced toward the eastern gate. They were within a hundred and fifty yards of their objective when a withering blast of arrows from the wall littered the ground with corpses and sent the survivors fleeing back to the trees. The men in the canoes rushed their boats toward the river-wall, and were met by another shower of clothyard shafts and a volley from the small ballistas mounted on towers on that side of the stockade. Stones and logs whirled through the air and splintered and sank half a dozen canoes, killing their occupants, and the other boats drew back out of range. A deep roar of triumph rose from the walls of the fort, answered by bestial howling from all quarters. ___'Shall we try to break through?' asked Balthus, trembling with eagerness. ___Conan shook his head. He stood with his arms folded, his head slightly bent, a somber and brooding figure. ___'The fort's doomed. The Picts are blood-mad, and won't stop until they're all killed. And there are too many of them for the men in the fort to kill. We couldn't break through, and if we did, we could do nothing but die with Valannus.' ___'There's nothing we can do but save our own hides, then?' ___'Yes. We've got to warn the settlers. Do you know why the Picts are not trying to burn the fort with fire-arrows? Because they don't want a flame that might warn the people to the east. They plan to stamp out the fort, and then sweep east before anyone knows of its fall. They may cross Thunder River and take Velitrium before the people know what's happened. At least they'll destroy every living thing between the fort and Thunder River. ___'We've failed to warn the fort, and I see now it would have done no good if we had succeeded. The fort's too poorly manned. A few more charges and the Picts will be over the walls and breaking down the gates. But we can start the settlers toward Velitrium. Come on! We're outside the circle the Picts have thrown around the fort. We'll keep clear of it.' ___They swung out in a wide arc, hearing the rising and falling of the volume of the yells,

marking each charge and repulse. The men in the fort were holding their own; but the shrieks of the Picts did not diminish in savagery. They vibrated with a timbre that held assurance of ultimate victory. ___Before Balthus realized they were close to it, they broke into the road leading east. ___'Now run!' grunted Conan. Balthus set his teeth. It was nineteen miles to Velitrium, a good five to Scalp Creek beyond which began the settlements. It seemed to the Aquilonian that they had been fighting and running for centuries. But the nervous excitement that rioted through his blood stimulated him to Herculean efforts. ___Slasher ran ahead of them, his head to the ground, snarling low, the first sound they had heard from him. ___'Picts ahead of us!' snarled Conan, dropping to one knee and scanning the ground in the starlight. He shook his head, baffled. 'I can't tell how many. Probably only a small party. Some that couldn't wait to take the fort. They've gone ahead to butcher the settlers in their beds! Come on!' ___Ahead of them presently they saw a small blaze through the trees, and heard a wild and ferocious chanting. The trail bent there, and leaving it, they cut across the bend, through the thickets. A few moments later they were looking on a hideous sight. An ox-wain stood in the road piled with meager household furnishings; it was burning; the oxen lay near with their throats cut. A man and a woman lay in the road, stripped and mutilated. Five Picts were dancing about them with fantastic leaps and bounds, waving bloody axes; one of them brandished the woman's red-smearred gown. ___At the sight a red haze swam before Balthus. Lifting his bow he lined the prancing figure, black against the fire, and loosed. The slayer leaped convulsively and fell dead with the arrow through his heart. Then the two white men and the dog were upon the startled survivors. Conan was animated merely by his fighting spirit and an old, old racial hate, but Balthus was afire with wrath. ___He met the first Pict to oppose him with a ferocious swipe that split the painted skull, and sprang over his falling body to grapple with the others. But Conan had already killed one of the two he had chosen, and the leap of the Aquilonian was a second late. The warrior was down with the long sword through him even as Balthus' ax was lifted. Turning toward the remaining Pict, Balthus saw Slasher rise from his victim, his great jaws dripping blood. ___Balthus said nothing as he looked down at the pitiful forms in the road beside the burning wain. Both were young, the woman little more than a girl. By some whim of chance the Picts had left her face unmarred, and even in the agonies of an awful death it was beautiful. But her soft young body had been hideously slashed with many knives - a mist clouded Balthus' eyes and he swallowed chokingly. The tragedy momentarily overcame him. He felt like falling upon the ground and weeping and biting the earth. ___'Some young couple just hitting out on their own,' Conan was saying as he wiped his sword unemotionally. 'On their way to the fort when the Picts met them. Maybe the boy was going to enter the service; maybe take up land on the river. Well, that's what will happen to every man, woman and child this side of Thunder River if we don't get them into Velitrium in a hurry.' ___Balthus' knees trembled as he followed Conan. But there was no hint of weakness in the long easy stride of the Cimmerian. There was a kinship between him and the great gaunt brute that glided beside him. Slasher no longer growled with his head to the trail. The way was clear before them. The yelling on the river came faintly to them, but Balthus believed the fort was still holding. Conan halted suddenly, with an oath. ___He showed Balthus a trail that led north from the road. It was an old trail, partly grown with new young growth, and this growth had recently been broken down. Balthus realized this fact more by feel than

sight, though Conan seemed to see like a cat in the dark. The Cimmerian showed him where broad wagon tracks turned off the main trail, deeply indented in the forest mold. ___ 'Settlers going to the licks after salt,' he grunted. 'They're at the edges of the marsh, about nine miles from here. Blast it! They'll be cut off and butchered to a man! Listen! One man can warn the people on the road. Go ahead and wake them up and herd them into Velitrium. I'll go and get the men gathering the salt. They'll be camped by the licks. We won't come back to the road. We'll head straight through the woods.' ___ With no further comment Conan turned off the trail and hurried down the dim path, and Balthus, after staring after him for a few moments, set out along the road. The dog had remained with him, and glided softly at his heels. When Balthus had gone a few rods he heard the animal growl. Whirling, he glared back the way he had come, and was startled to see a vague ghostly glow vanishing into the forest in the direction Conan had taken. Slasher rumbled deep in his throat, his hackles stiff and his eyes balls of green fire. Balthus remembered the grim apparition that had taken the head of the merchant Tiberias not far from that spot, and he hesitated. The thing must be following Conan. But the giant Cimmerian had repeatedly demonstrated his ability to take care of himself, and Balthus felt his duty lay toward the helpless settlers who slumbered in the path of the red hurricane. The horror of the fiery phantom was overshadowed by the horror of those limp, violated bodies beside the burning ox-wain. ___ He hurried down the road, crossed Scalp Creek and came in sight of the first settler's cabin - a long, low structure of ax-hewn logs. In an instant he was pounding on the door. A sleepy voice inquired his pleasure. ___ 'Get up! The Picts are over the river!' ___ That brought instant response. A low cry echoed his words and then the door was thrown open by a woman in a scanty shift. Her hair hung over her bare shoulders in disorder; she held a candle in one hand and an ax in the other. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide with terror. ___ 'Come in!' she begged. 'We'll hold the cabin.' ___ 'No. We must make for Velitrium. The fort can't hold them back. It may have fallen already. Don't stop to dress. Get your children and come on.' ___ 'But my man's gone with the others after salt!' she wailed, wringing her hands. Behind her peered three tousled youngsters, blinking and bewildered. ___ 'Conan's gone after them. He'll fetch them through safe. We must hurry up the road to warn the other cabins.' ___ Relief flooded her countenance. ___ 'Mitra be thanked!' she cried. 'If the Cimmerian's gone after them, they're safe if mortal man can save them!' ___ In a whirlwind of activity she snatched up the smallest child and herded the others through the door ahead of her. Balthus took the candle and ground it out under his heel. He listened an instant. No sound came up the dark road. ___ 'Have you got a horse?' ___ 'In the stable,' she groaned. 'Oh, hurry!' ___ He pushed her aside as she fumbled with shaking hands at the bars. He led the horse out and lifted the children on its back, telling them to hold to its mane and to one another. They stared at him seriously, making no outcry. The woman took the horse's halter and set out up the road. She still gripped her ax and Balthus knew that if cornered she would fight with the desperate courage of a she-panther. ___ He held behind, listening. He was oppressed by the belief that the fort had been stormed and taken; that the dark-skinned hordes were already streaming up the road toward Velitrium, drunken on slaughter and mad for blood. They would come with the speed of starving wolves. ___ Presently they saw another cabin looming ahead. The woman started to shriek a warning, but Balthus stopped her. He hurried to the door and knocked. A woman's voice answered him. He repeated his warning, and soon the cabin

disgorged its occupants - an old woman, two young women and four children. Like the other woman's husband, their men had gone to the salt licks the day before, unsuspecting of any danger. One of the young women seemed dazed, the other prone to hysteria. But the old woman, a stern old veteran of the frontier, quieted them harshly; she helped Balthus get out the two horses that were stabled in a pen behind the cabin and put the children on them. Balthus urged that she herself mount with them, but she shook her head and made one of the younger women ride. ___'She's with child,' grunted the old woman. 'I can walk - and fight, too, if it comes to that.' ___As they set out, one of the women said: 'A young couple passed along the road about dusk; we advised them to spend the night at our cabin, but they were anxious to make the fort tonight. Did - did?' ___'They met the Picts,' answered Balthus briefly, and the woman sobbed in horror. ___They were scarcely out of sight of the cabin when some distance behind them quavered a long high-pitched yell. ___'A wolf!' exclaimed one of the women. ___'A painted wolf with an ax in his hand,' muttered Balthus. 'Go! Rouse the other settlers along the road and take them with you. I'll scout along behind.' ___Without a word the old woman herded her charges ahead of her. As they faded into the darkness, Balthus could see the pale ovals that were the faces of the children twisted back over their shoulders to stare toward him. He remembered his own people on the Tauran and a moment's giddy sickness swam over him. With momentary weakness he groaned and sank down in the road; his muscular arm fell over Slasher's massive neck and he felt the dog's warm moist tongue touch his face. ___He lifted his head and grinned with a painful effort. ___'Come on, boy,' he mumbled, rising. 'We've got work to do.' ___A red glow suddenly became evident through the trees. The Picts had fired the last hut. He grinned. How Zogar Sag would froth if he knew his warriors had let their destructive natures get the better of them. The fire would warn the people farther up the road. They would be awake and alert when the fugitives reached them. But his face grew grim. The women were traveling slowly, on foot and on the overloaded horses. The swift-footed Picts would run them down within a mile, unless? he took his position behind a tangle of fallen logs beside the trail- The road west of him was lighted by the burning cabin, and when the Picts came he saw them first - black furtive figures etched against the distant glare. ___Drawing a shaft to the head, he loosed and one of the figures crumpled. The rest melted into the woods on either side of the road. Slasher whimpered with the killing lust beside him. Suddenly a figure appeared on the fringe of the trail, under the trees, and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson. ___No more appeared in the trail; Balthus began to fear they were stealing past his position through the woods, and when he heard a faint sound to his left he loosed blindly. He cursed as he heard the shaft splinter against a tree, but Slasher glided away as silently as a phantom, and presently Balthus heard a thrashing and a gurgling; then Slasher came like a ghost through the bushes, snuggling his great, crimson-stained head against Balthus' arm. Blood oozed from a gash in his shoulder, but the sounds in the wood had ceased for ever. ___The men lurking on the edges of the road evidently sensed the fate of their companion, and decided that an open charge was preferable to being dragged down in the dark by a devil-beast they could neither see nor hear. Perhaps they realized that only one man lay

behind the logs. They came with a sudden rush, breaking cover from both sides of the trail. Three dropped with arrows through them - and the remaining pair hesitated. One turned and ran back down the road, but the other lunged over the breastwork, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the dim light, his ax lifted. Balthus' foot slipped as he sprang up, but the slip saved his life. The descending ax shaved a lock of hair from his head, and the Pict rolled down the logs from the force of his wasted blow. Before he could regain his feet Slasher tore his throat out. Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which time Balthus wondered if the man who had fled had been the only survivor of the party. Obviously it had been a small band that had either left the fighting at the fort, or was scouting ahead of the main body. Each moment that passed increased the chances for safety of the women and children hurrying toward Velitrium. Then without warning a shower of arrows whistled over his retreat. A wild howling rose from the woods along the trail. Either the survivor had gone after aid, or another party had joined the first. The burning cabin still smoldered, lending a little light. Then they were after him, gliding through the trees beside the trail. He shot three arrows and threw the bow away. As if sensing his plight, they came on, not yelling now, but in deadly silence except for a swift pad of many feet. He fiercely hugged the head of the great dog growling at his side, muttered: 'All right, boy, give 'em hell!' and sprang to his feet, drawing his ax. Then the dark figures flooded over the breastworks and closed in a storm of flailing axes, stabbing knives and ripping fangs. 7 The Devil in the Fire

When Conan turned from the Velitrium road he expected a run of some nine miles and set himself to the task. But he had not gone four when he heard the sounds of a party of men ahead of him. From the noise they were making in their progress he knew they were not Picts. He hailed them. 'Who's there?' challenged a harsh voice. 'Stand where you are until we know you, or you'll get an arrow through you.' 'You couldn't hit an elephant in this darkness,' answered Conan impatiently. 'Come on, fool; it's I - Conan. The Picts are over the river.' 'We suspected as much,' answered the leader of the men, as they strode forward - tall, rangy men, stern-faced, with bows in their hands. 'One of our party wounded an antelope and tracked it nearly to Black River. He heard them yelling down the river and ran back to our camp. We left the salt and the wagons, turned the oxen loose and came as swiftly as we could. If the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will be ranging up the road toward our cabins.' 'Your families are safe,' grunted Conan. 'My companion went ahead to take them to Velitrium. If we go back to the main road we may run into the whole horde. We'll strike southeast, through the timber. Go ahead. I'll scout behind.' A few moments later the whole band was hurrying southeastward. Conan followed more slowly, keeping just within earshot. He cursed the noise they were making; that many Picts or Cimmerians would have moved through the woods with no more noise than the wind makes as it blows through the black branches. He had just crossed a small glade when he wheeled answering the conviction of his primitive instincts that he was being followed. Standing motionless among the bushes he heard the sounds of the retreating settlers fade away. Then a voice called faintly back along the way he had come: 'Conan! Conan! Wait for me, Conan!' 'Balthus!' he swore bewilderedly. Cautiously he called: 'Here I am.' 'Wait for me, Conan!' the voice came more distinctly. Conan moved out of the shadows, scowling. 'What the devil are you doing here? - Crom!' He half crouched, the flesh prickling along his spine. It was not Balthus who was emerging from the other side of the glade. A

weird glow burned through the trees. It moved toward him, shimmering weirdly - a green witch-fire that moved with purpose and intent. ___It halted some feet away and Conan glared at it, trying to distinguish its fire-misted outlines. The quivering flame had a solid core; the flame was but a green garment that masked some animate and evil entity; but the Cimmerian was unable to make out its shape or likeness. Then, shockingly, a voice spoke to him from amidst the fiery column. ___'Why do you stand like a sheep waiting for the butcher, Conan?' ___The voice was human but carried strange vibrations that were not human. ___'Sheep?' Conan's wrath got the best of his momentary awe. 'Do you think I'm afraid of a damned Pictish swamp devil? A friend called me.' ___'I called in his voice,' answered the other. 'The men you follow belong to my brother; I would not rob his knife of their blood. But you are mine. Oh, fool, you have come from the far gray hills of Cimmeria to meet your doom in the forests of Conajohara.' ___'You've had your chance at me before now,' snorted Conan. 'Why didn't you kill me then, if you could?' ___'My brother had not painted a skull black for you and hurled it into the fire that burns for ever on Gullah's black altar. He had not whispered your name to the black ghosts that haunt the uplands of the Dark Land. But a bat has flown over the Mountains of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fire-flies in their hair.' ___'Why have the gods of darkness doomed me to death?' growled Conan. ___Something - a hand, foot or talon, he could not tell which, thrust out from the fire and marked swiftly on the mold. A symbol blazed there, marked with fire, and faded, but not before he recognized it. ___'You dared make the sign which only a priest of Jhebbal Sag dare make. Thunder rumbled through the black Mountain of the Dead and the altar-hut of Gullah was thrown down by a wind from the Gulf of Ghosts. The loon which is messenger to the Four Brothers of the Night flew swiftly and whispered your name in my ear. Your head will hang in the altar-hut of my brother. Your body will be eaten by the black-winged, sharp-beaked Children of Jhil.' ___'Who the devil is your brother?' demanded Conan. Flis sword was naked in his hand, and he was subtly loosening the ax in his belt. ___'Zogar Sag; a child of Jhebbal Sag who still visits his sacred groves at times. A woman of Gwawela slept in a grove holy to Jhebbal Sag. Her babe was Zogar Sag. I too am a son of Jhebbal Sag, out of a fire-being from a far realm. Zogar Sag summoned me out of the Misty Lands. With incantations and sorcery and his own blood he materialized me in the flesh of his own planet. We are one, tied together by invisible threads. His thoughts are my thoughts; if he is struck, I am bruised. If I am cut, he bleeds. But I have talked enough. Soon your ghost will talk with the ghosts of the Dark Land, and they will tell you of the old gods which are not dead, but sleep in the outer abysses, and from time to time awake.' ___'I'd like to see what you look like,' muttered Conan, working his ax free, 'you who leave a track like a bird, who burn like a flame and yet speak with a human voice.' ___'You shall see,' answered the voice from the flame, 'see, and carry the knowledge with you into the Dark Land.' ___The flames leaped and sank, dwindling and dimming. A face began to take shadowy form. At first Conan thought it was Zogar Sag himself who stood wrapped in green fire. But the face was higher than his own and there was a demoniac aspect about it - Conan had noted various abnormalities about Zogar Sag's features - an obliqueness of the eyes, a sharpness of the ears, a wolfish thinness of the lips; these peculiarities were exaggerated in the apparition which swayed before him. The eyes were

red as coals of living fire.____More details came into view: a slender torso, covered with snaky scales, which was yet man-like in shape, with man-like arms, from the waist upward; below, long crane-like legs ended in splay, three-toed feet like those of some huge bird. Along the monstrous limbs the blue fire fluttered and ran. He saw it as through a glistening mist.____Then suddenly it was towering over him, though he had not seen it move toward him. A long arm, which for the first time he noticed was armed with curving, sickle-like talons, swung high and swept down at his neck. With a fierce cry he broke the spell and bounded aside, hurling his ax. The demon avoided the cast with an unbelievably quick movement of its narrow head and was on him again with a hissing rush of leaping flames.____But fear had fought for it when it slew its other victims, and Conan was not afraid. He knew that any being clothed in material flesh can be slain by material weapons, however grisly its form may be.____One flailing talon-armed limb knocked his helmet from his head. A little lower and it would have decapitated him. But fierce joy surged through him as his savagely driven sword sank deep in the monster's groin. He bounded backward from a flailing stroke, tearing his sword free as he leaped. The talons raked his breast, ripping through mail-links as if they had been cloth. But his return spring was like that of a starving wolf. He was inside the lashing arms and driving his sword deep in the monster's belly - felt the arms lock about him and the talons ripping the mail from his back as they sought his vitals - he was lapped and dazzled by blue flame that was chill as ice - then he had torn fiercely away from the weakening arms and his sword cut the air in a tremendous swipe.____The demon staggered and fell sprawling sidewise, its head hanging only by a shred of flesh. The fires that veiled it leaped fiercely upward, now red as gushing blood, hiding the figure from view. A scent of burning flesh filled Conan's nostrils. Shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes, he wheeled and ran staggering through the woods. Blood trickled down his limbs. Somewhere, miles to the south, he saw the faint glow of flames that might mark a burning cabin. Behind him, toward the road, rose a distant howling that spurred him to greater efforts._____8 Conajohara No More____There had been fighting on Thunder River; fierce fighting before the walls of Velitrium; ax and torch had been piled up and down the bank, and many a settler's cabin lay in ashes before the painted horde was rolled back.____A strange quiet followed the storm, in which people gathered and talked in hushed voices, and men with red-stained bandages drank their ale silently in the taverns along the river bank.____There, to Conan the Cimmerian, moodily quaffing from a great wine-glass, came a gaunt forester with a bandage about his head and his arm in a sling. He was the one survivor of Fort Tuscelan.____'You went with the soldiers to the ruins of the fort?'____Conan nodded.____'I wasn't able,' murmured the other. 'There was no fighting?'____'The Picts had fallen back across the Black River. Something must have broken their nerve, though only the devil who made them knows what.'____The woodsman glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed.____'They say there were no bodies worth disposing of.'____Conan shook his head. 'Ashes. The Picts had piled them in the fort and set fire to the fort before they crossed the river. Their own dead and the men of Valannus.'____'Valannus was killed among the last - in the hand-to-hand fighting when they broke the barriers. They tried to take him alive, but he made them kill him. They took ten of the rest of us prisoners when we were so weak from fighting we could fight no more. They butchered nine of us then and there. It was when Zogar Sag died that I got my chance to break free and run for it.'____'Zogar Sag's

dead?' ejaculated Conan. ___ 'Aye. I saw him die. That's why the Picts didn't press the fight against Velitrium as fiercely as they did against the fort. It was strange. He took no wounds in battle. He was dancing among the slain, waving an ax with which he'd just brained the last of my comrades. He came at me, howling like a wolf - and then he staggered and dropped the ax, and began to reel in a circle screaming as I never heard a man or beast scream before. He fell between me and the fire they'd built to roast me, gagging and frothing at the mouth, and all at once he went rigid and the Picts shouted that he was dead. It was during the confusion that I slipped my cords and ran for the woods. ___ 'I saw him lying in the firelight. No weapon had touched him. Yet there were red marks like the wounds of a sword in the groin, belly and neck - the last as if his head had been almost severed from his body. What do you make of that?' ___ Conan made no reply, and the forester, aware of the reticence of barbarians on certain matters, continued: 'He lived by magic, and somehow, he died by magic. It was the mystery of his death that took the heart out of the Picts. Not a man who saw it was in the fighting before Velitrium. They hurried back across Black River. Those that struck Thunder River were warriors who had come on before Zogar Sag died. They were not enough to take the city by themselves. ___ 'I came along the road, behind their main force, and I know none followed me from the fort. I sneaked through their lines and got into the town. You brought the settlers through all right, but their women and children got into Velitrium just ahead of those painted devils. If the youth Balthus and old Slasher hadn't held them up awhile, they'd have butchered every woman and child in Conajohara. I passed the place where Balthus and the dog made their last stand. They were lying amid a heap of dead Picts - I counted seven, brained by his ax, or disemboweled by the dog's fangs, and there were others in the road with arrows sticking in them. Gods, what a fight that must have been!' ___ 'He was a man,' said Conan. 'I drink to his shade, and to the shade of the dog, who knew no fear.' He quaffed part of the wine, then emptied the rest upon the floor, with a curious heathen gesture, and smashed the goblet. 'The heads of ten Picts shall pay for his, and seven heads for the dog, who was a better warrior than many a man.' ___ And the forester, staring into the moody, smoldering blue eyes, knew the barbaric oath would be kept. ___ 'They'll not rebuild the fort?' ___ 'No; Conajohara is lost to Aquilonia. The frontier has been pushed back. Thunder River will be the new border.' ___ The woodsman sighed and stared at his calloused hand, worn from contact with ax-haft and sword-hilt. Conan reached his long arm for the wine-jug. The forester stared at him, comparing him with the men about them, the men who had died along the lost river, comparing him with those other wild men over that river. Conan did not seem aware of his gaze. ___ 'Barbarism is the natural state of mankind,' the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. 'Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.'

THE BLACK STRANGER _____ 1 The Painted Men ___ One moment the glade lay empty; the next, a man stood poised warily at the edge of the bushes. There had been no sound to warn the grey squirrels of his coming. But the gay-hued birds that flitted about in the sunshine of the open space took fright at his sudden appearance and rose in a clamoring cloud. The man scowled and glanced quickly back the way he had come, as if fearing their flight had betrayed his position to some one unseen. Then he stalked across the glade, placing his feet with care. For all his massive, muscular build he moved with the supple certitude of a panther. He was naked

except for a rag twisted about his loins, and his limbs were criss-crossed with scratches from briars, and caked with dried mud. A brown-crusted bandage was knotted about his thickly-muscled left arm. Under his matted black mane his face was drawn and gaunt, and his eyes burned like the eyes of a wounded panther. He limped slightly as he followed the dim path that led across the open space.____Halfway across the glade he stopped short and whirled, catlike, facing back the way he had come, as a long-drawn call quavered out across the forest. To another man it would have seemed merely the howl of a wolf. But this man knew it was no wolf. He was a Cimmerian and understood the voices of the wilderness as a city-bred man understands the voices of his friends.____Rage burned redly in his bloodshot eyes as he turned once more and hurried along the path, which, as it left the glade, ran along the edge of a dense thicket that rose in a solid clump of greenery among the trees and bushes. A massive log, deeply embedded in the grassy earth, paralleled the fringe of the thicket, lying between it and the path. When the Cimmerian saw this log he halted and looked back across the glade. To the average eye there were no signs to show that he had passed; but there was evidence visible to his wilderness-sharpened eyes, and therefore to the equally keen eyes of those who pursued him. He snarled silently, the red rage growing in his eyes - the berserk fury of a hunted beast which is ready to turn at bay.____He walked down the trail with comparative carelessness, here and there crushing a grass-blade beneath his foot. Then, when he had reached the further end of the great log, he sprang upon it, turned and ran lightly back along it. The bark had long been worn away by the elements. He left no sign to show the keenest forest-eyes that he had doubled on his trail. When he reached the densest point of the thicket he faded into it like a shadow, with hardly the quiver of a leaf to mark his passing.____The minutes dragged. The grey squirrels chattered again on the branches - then flattened their bodies and were suddenly mute. Again the glade was invaded. As silently as the first man had appeared, three other men materialized out of the eastern edge of the clearing. They were dark-skinned men of short stature, with thickly-muscled chests and arms. They wore beaded buckskin loin-cloths, and an eagle's feather was thrust into each black mane. They were painted in hideous designs, and heavily armed.____They had scanned the glade carefully before showing themselves in the open, for they moved out of the bushes without hesitation, in close single file, treading as softly as leopards, and bending down to stare at the path. They were following the trail of the Cimmerian, but it was no easy task even for these human bloodhounds. They moved slowly across the glade, and then one stiffened, grunted and pointed with his broad-bladed stabbing spear at a crushed grass-blade where the path entered the forest again. All halted instantly and their beady black eyes quested the forest walls. But their quarry was well hidden; they saw nothing to awake their suspicion, and presently they moved on, more rapidly, following the faint marks that seemed to indicate their prey was growing careless through weakness or desperation.____They had just passed the spot where the thicket crowded closest to the ancient trail when the Cimmerian bounded into the path behind them and plunged his knife between the shoulders of the last man. The attack was so quick and unexpected the Pict had no chance to save himself. The blade was in his heart before he knew he was in peril. The other two whirled with the instant, steel-trap quickness of savages, but even as his knife sank home, the Cimmerian struck a tremendous blow with the war-axe in his right hand. The second Pict was in the act of turning as the axe fell. It split his skull to the

teeth.____The remaining Pict, a chief by the scarlet tip of his eagle-feather, came savagely to the attack. He was stabbing at the Cimmerian's breast even as the killer wrenched his axe from the dead man's head. The Cimmerian hurled the body against the chief and followed with an attack as furious and desperate as the charge of a wounded tiger. The Pict, staggering under the impact of the corpse against him, made no attempt to parry the dripping axe; the instinct to slay submerging even the instinct to live, he drove his spear ferociously at his enemy's broad breast. The Cimmerian had the advantage of a greater intelligence, and a weapon in each hand. The hatchet, checking its downward sweep, struck the spear aside, and the knife in the Cimmerian's left hand ripped upward into the painted belly.____An awful howl burst from the Pict's lips as he crumpled, disemboweled - a cry not of fear or of pain, but of baffled, bestial fury, the death-screach of a panther. It was answered by a wild chorus of yells some distance east of the glade. The Cimmerian started convulsively, wheeled, crouching like a wild thing at bay, lips asnarl, shaking the sweat from his face. Blood trickled down his forearm from under the bandage.____With a gasping, incoherent imprecation he turned and fled westward. He did not pick his way now, but ran with all the speed of his long legs, calling on the deep and all but inexhaustible reservoirs of endurance which are Nature's compensation for a barbaric existence. Behind him for a space the woods weresilent, then a demoniacal howling burst out at the spot he had recently left, and he knew his pursuers had found the bodies of his victims. He had no breath for cursing the blood-drops that kept spilling to the ground from his freshly opened wound, leaving a trail a child could follow. He had thought that perhaps these three Picts were all that still pursued him of the war-party which had followed him for over a hundred miles. But he might have known these human wolves never quit a blood-trail.____The woods were silent again, and that meant they were racing after him, marking his path by the betraying blood-drops he could not check. A wind out of the west blew against his face, laden with a salty dampness he recognized. Dully he was amazed. If he was that close to the sea the long chase had been even longer than he had realized. But it was nearly over. Even his wolfish vitality was ebbing under the terrible strain. He gasped for breath and there was a sharp pain in his side. His legs trembled with weariness and the lame one ached like the cut of a knife in the tendons each time he set the foot to earth. He had followed the instincts of the wilderness which bred him, straining every nerve and sinew, exhausting every subtlety and artifice to survive. Now in his extremity he was obeying another instinct, looking for a place to turn at bay and sell his life at a bloody price.____He did not leave the trail for the tangled depths on either hand. He knew that it was futile to hope to evade his pursuers now. He ran on down the trail while the blood pounded louder and louder in his ears and each breath he drew was a racking, dry-lipped gulp. Behind him a mad baying broke out, token that they were close on his heels and expected to overhaul their prey swiftly. They would come as fleet as starving wolves now, howling at every leap.____Abruptly he burst from the denseness of the trees and saw, ahead of him, the ground pitching upward, and the ancient trail winding up rocky ledges between jagged boulders. All swam before him in a dizzy red mist, but it was a hill he had come to, a rugged crag rising abruptly from the forest about its foot. And the dim trail wound up to a broad ledge near the summit.____That ledge would be as good a place to die as any. He limped up the trail, going on hands and knees in the steeper places, his knife between his teeth. He had not yet

reached the jutting ledge when some forty painted savages broke from among the trees, howling like wolves. At the sight of their prey their screams rose to a devil's crescendo, and they raced toward the foot of the crag, loosing arrows as they came. The shafts showered about the man who doggedly climbed upward, and one stuck in the calf of his leg. Without pausing in his climb he tore it out and threw it aside, heedless of the less accurate missiles which splintered on the rocks about him. Grimly he hauled himself over the rim of the ledge and turned about, drawing his hatchet and shirting knife to hand. He lay glaring down at his pursuers over the rim, only his shock of hair and blazing eyes visible. His chest heaved as he drank in the air in great shuddering gasps, and he clenched his teeth against a tendency toward nausea. Only a few arrows whistled up at him. The horde knew its prey was cornered. The warriors came on howling, leaping agilely over the rocks at the foot of the hill, war-axes in their hand. The first to reach the crag was a brawny brave whose eagle feather was stained scarlet as a token of chieftainship. He halted briefly, one foot on the sloping trail, arrow notched and drawn halfway back, head thrown back and lips parted for an exultant yell. But the shaft was never loosed. He froze into motionlessness and the blood-lust in his black eyes gave way to a look of startled recognition. With a whoop he gave back, throwing his arms wide to check the rush of his howling braves. The man crouching on the ledge above them understood the Pictish tongue, but he was too far away to catch the significance of the staccato phrases snapped at the warriors by the crimson-feathered chief. But all ceased their yelping, and stood mutely staring up -not at the man on the ledge, it seemed to him, but at the hill itself. Then without further hesitation, they unstrung their bows and thrust them into buckskin cases at their girdles; turned their backs and trotted across the open space, to melt into the forest without a backward look. The Cimmerian glared in amazement. He knew the Pictish nature too well not to recognize the finality expressed in the departure. He knew they would not come back. They were heading for their villages, a hundred miles to the east. But he could not understand it. What was there about his refuge that would cause a Pictish war-party to abandon a chase it had followed so long with all the passion of hungry wolves? He knew there were sacred places, spots set aside as sanctuaries by the various clans, and that a fugitive, taking refuge in one of these sanctuaries, was safe from the clan which raised it. But the different tribes seldom respected sanctuaries of other tribes; and the men who had pursued him certainly had no sacred spots of their own in this region. They were the men of the Eagle, whose villages lay far to the east, adjoining the country of the Wolf-Picts. It was the Wolves who had captured him, in a foray against the Aquilonian settlements along Thunder River, and they had given him to the Eagles in return for a captured Wolf chief. The Eaglemen had a red score against the giant Cimmerian, and now it was redder still, for his escape had cost the life of a noted war-chief. That was why they had followed him so relentlessly, over broad rivers and hills and through the long leagues of gloomy forest, the hunting grounds of hostile tribes. And now the survivors of that long chase turned back when their enemy was run to earth and trapped. He shook his head, unable to understand it. He rose gingerly, dizzy from the long grind, and scarcely able to realize that it was over. His limbs were stiff, his wounds ached. He spat dryly and cursed, rubbing his burning, bloodshot eyes with the back of his thick wrist. He blinked and took stock of his surroundings. Below him the green wilderness waved and billowed away

and away in a solid mass, and above its western rim a steel-blue haze he knew hung over the ocean. The wind stirred his black mane, and the salt tang of the atmosphere revived him. He expanded his enormous chest and drank it in. Then he turned stiffly and painfully about, growling at the twinge in his bleeding calf, and investigated the ledge whereon he stood. Behind it rose a sheer rocky cliff to the crest of the crag, some thirty feet above him. A narrow ladder-like stair of hand-holds had been niched into the rock. And a few feet from its foot there was a cleft in the wall, wide enough and tall enough for a man to enter. He limped to the cleft, peered in, and grunted. The sun, hanging high above the western forest, slanted into the cleft, revealing a tunnel-like cavern beyond, and rested a revealing beam on the arch at which this tunnel ended. In that arch was set a heavy iron-bound oaken door! This was amazing. This country was howling wilderness. The Cimmerian knew that for a thousand miles this western coast ran bare and uninhabited except by the villages of the ferocious sea-land tribes, who were even less civilized than their forest-dwelling brothers. The nearest outposts of civilization were the frontier settlements along Thunder River, hundreds of miles to the east. The Cimmerian knew he was the only white man ever to cross the wilderness that lay between that river and the coast. Yet that door was no work of Picts. Being unexplainable, it was an object of suspicion, and suspiciously he approached it, ax and knife ready. Then as his bloodshot eyes became more accustomed to the soft gloom that lurked on either side of the narrow shaft of sunlight, he noticed something else - thick iron-bound chests ranged along the walls. A blaze of comprehension came into his eyes. He bent over one, but the lid resisted his efforts. He lifted his hatchet to shatter the ancient lock then changed his mind and limped toward the arched door. His bearing was more confident now, his weapons hung at his sides. He pushed against the ornately carven door and it swung inward without resistance. Then his manner changed again, with lightning-like abruptness; he recoiled with a startled curse, knife and hatchet flashing as they leaped to positions of defense. An instant he poised there, like a statue of fierce menace, craning his massive neck to glare through the door. It was darker in the large natural chamber into which he was looking, but a dim glow emanated from the great jewel which stood on a tiny ivory pedestal in the center of the great ebony table about which sat those silent shapes whose appearance had so startled the intruder. They did not move, they did not turn their heads toward him. 'Well,' he said harshly; 'are you all drunk?' There was no reply. He was not a man easily abashed, yet now he felt disconcerted. 'You might offer me a glass of that wine you're swigging,' he growled, his natural truculence roused by the awkwardness of the situation. 'By Crom, you show damned poor courtesy to a man who's been one of your own brotherhood. Are you going to?' his voice trailed into silence, and in silence he stood and stared awhile at those bizarre figures sitting so silently about the great ebon table. 'They're not drunk,' he muttered presently. 'They're not even drinking. What devil's game is this?' He stepped across the threshold and was instantly fighting for his life against the murderous, unseen lingers that clutched his throat.

2

Men From the Sea

Belesa idly stirred a sea-shell with a daintily slippered toe, mentally comparing its delicate pink edges to the first pink haze of dawn that rose over the misty beaches. It was not dawn now, but the sun was not long up, and the light, pearl-grey clouds which drifted over the waters had not yet been dispelled. Belesa lifted her splendidly

shaped head and stared out over a scene alien and repellent to her, yet drearily familiar in every detail. From her dainty feet the tawny sands ran to meet the softly lapping waves which stretched westward to be lost in the blue haze of the horizon. She was standing on the southern curve of the wide bay, and south of her the land sloped upward to the low ridge which formed one horn of that bay. From that ridge, she knew, one could look southward across the bare waters - into infinities of distance as absolute as the view to the westward and to the northward. ___Glancing listlessly landward, she absently scanned the fortress which had been her home for the past year. Against a vague pearl and cerulean morning sky floated the golden and scarlet flag of her house - an ensign which awakened no enthusiasm in her youthful bosom, though it had flown triumphantly over many a bloody field in the far South. She made out the figures of men toiling in the gardens and fields that huddled near the fort, seeming to shrink from the gloomy rampart of the forest which fringed the open belt on the east, stretching north and south as far as she could see. She feared that forest, and that fear was shared by every one in that tiny settlement. Nor was it an idle fear - death lurked in those whispering depths, death swift and terrible, death slow and hideous, hidden, painted, tireless, unrelenting. ___She sighed and moved listlessly toward the water's edge, with no set purpose in mind. The dragging days were all of one color, and the world of cities and courts and gaiety seemed not only thousands of miles but long ages away. Again she sought in vain for the reason that had caused a Count of Zingara to flee with his retainers to this wild coast, a thousand miles from the land that bore him, exchanging the castle of his ancestors for a hut of logs. ___Her eyes softened at the light patter of small bare feet across the sands. A young girl came running over the low sandy ridge, quite naked, her slight body dripping, and her flaxen hair plastered wetly on her small head. Her wistful eyes were wide with excitement. ___'Lady Belesa!' she cried, rendering the Zingaran words with a soft Ophirean accent. 'Oh, Lady Belesa!' ___Breathless from her scamper, she stammered and made incoherent gestures with her hands. Belesa smiled and put an arm about the child, not minding that her silken dress came in contact with the damp, warm body. In her lonely, isolated life Belesa bestowed the tenderness of a naturally affectionate nature on the pitiful waif she had taken away from a brutal master encountered on that long voyage up from the southern coasts. ___'What are you trying to tell me, Tina? Get your breath, child.' ___'A ship!' cried the girl, pointing southward. 'I was swimming in a pool that the sea-tide left in the sand, on the other side of the ridge, and I saw it! A ship sailing up out of the south!' ___She tugged timidly at Belesa's hand, her slender body all aquiver, and Belesa felt her own heart beat faster at the mere thought of an unknown visitor. They had seen no sail since coming to that barren shore. ___Tina flitted ahead of her over the yellow sands, skirting the tiny pools the outgoing tide had left in shallow depressions. They mounted the low undulating ridge, and Tina poised there, a slender white figure against the clearing sky, her wet flaxen hair blowing about her thin face, a frail quivering arm outstretched. ___'Look, my Lady!' ___Belesa had already seen it - a billowing white sail, filled with the freshening south wind, beating up along the coast, a few miles from the point. Her heart skipped a beat. A small thing can loom large in colorless and isolated lives; but Belesa felt a premonition of strange and violent events. She felt that it was not by chance that this sail was beating up this lonely coast. There was no harbor town to the north, though one sailed to the

ultimate shores of ice; and the nearest port to the south was a thousand miles away. What brought this stranger to lonely Korvela Bay?___Tina pressed close to her mistress, apprehension pinching her thin features.___'Who can it be, my Lady?' she stammered, the wind whipping color to her pale cheeks. 'Is it the man the Count fears?''___Belesa looked down at her, her brow shadowed.___'Why do you say that, child? How do you know my uncle fears anyone?''___'He must,' returned Tina naively, 'or he would never have come to hide in this lonely spot. Look, my Lady, how fast it comes!''___'We must go and inform my uncle,' murmured Belesa. 'The fishing boats have not yet gone out, and none of the men have seen that sail. Get your clothes, Tina. Hurry!''___The child scampered down the low slope to the pool where she had been bathing when she sighted the craft, and snatched up the slippers, tunic and girdle she had left lying on the sand. She skipped back up the ridge, hopping grotesquely as she donned her scanty garments in mid-flight.___Belesa, anxiously watching the approaching sail, caught her hand, and they hurried toward the fort. A few moments after they had entered the gate of the log palisade which enclosed the building, the strident blare of the trumpet startled the workers in the gardens, and the men just opening the boat-house doors to push the fishing boats down their rollers to the water's edge.___Every man outside the fort dropped his tool or abandoned whatever he was doing and ran for the stockade without pausing to look about for the cause of the alarm. The straggling lines of fleeing men converged on the opened gate, and every head was twisted over its shoulder to gaze fearfully at the dark line of woodland to the east. Not one looked seaward.___They thronged through the gate, shouting questions at the sentries who patrolled the firing-ledges built below the up-jutting points of the upright palisade logs.___'What is it? Why are we called in? Are the Picts coming?''___For answer one taciturn man-at-arms in worn leathers and rusty steel pointed southward. From his vantage-point the sail was now visible. Men began to climb up on the ledges, staring toward the sea.___On a small lookout tower on the roof of the manor house, which was built of logs like the other buildings, Count Valenso watched the on-sweeping sail as it rounded the point of the southern horn. The Count was a lean, wiry man of medium height and late middle age. He was dark, somber of expression. Trunk-hose and doublet were of black silk, the only color about his costume the jewels that twinkled on his sword hilt, and the wine-colored cloak thrown carelessly over his shoulder. He twisted his thin black mustache nervously, and turned his gloomy eyes on his seneschal - a leather-featured man in steel and satin.___'What do you make of it, Galbro?''___'A carack,' answered the seneschal. 'It is a carack trimmed and rigged like a craft of the Barachan pirates - look there!''___A chorus of cries below them echoed his ejaculation; the ship had cleared the point and was slanting inward across the bay. And all saw the flag that suddenly broke forth from the masthead - a black flag, with a scarlet skull gleaming in the sun.___The people within the stockade stared wildly at that dread emblem; then all eyes turned up toward the tower, where the master of the fort stood somberly, his cloak whipping about him in the wind.___'It's a Barachan, all right,' grunted Galbro. 'And unless I am mad, it's Strom's Red Hand. What is he doing on this naked coast?''___'He can mean no good for us,' growled the Count. A glance below showed him that the massive gates had been closed, and that the captain of his men-at-arms, gleaming in steel, was directing his men to their stations, some to the ledges, some to the tower loop-holes. He was massing his main strength along the western wall, in the midst of

which was the gate.____Valenso had been followed into exile by a hundred men: soldiers, vassals and serfs. Of these some forty were men-at-arms, wearing helmets and suits of mail, armed with swords, axes and crossbows. The rest were toilers, without armor save for shirts of toughened leather, but they were brawny stalwarts, and skilled in the use of their hunting bows, woodsmen's axes, and boar-spears. They took their places, scowling at their hereditary enemies. The pirates of the Barachan Isles, a tiny archipelago off the southwestern coast of Zingara, had preyed on the people of the mainland for more than a century.____The men on the stockade gripped their bows or boar-spears and stared somberly at the carack which swung inshore, its brass work flashing in the sun. They could see the figures swarming on the deck, and hear the lusty yells of the seamen. Steel twinkled along the rail.____The Count had retired from the tower, shooping his niece and her eager protegee before him, and having donned helmet and cuirass, he betook himself to the palisade to direct the defense. His subjects watched him with moody fatalism. They intended to sell their lives as dearly as they could, but they had scant hope of victory, in spite of their strong position. They were oppressed by a conviction of doom. A year on that naked coast, with the brooding threat of that devil-haunted forest looming for ever at their backs, had shadowed their souls with gloomy forebodings. Their women stood silently in the doorways of their huts, built inside the stockade, and quieted the clamor of their children.____Belesa and Tina watched eagerly from an upper window in the manor house, and Belesa felt the child's tense little body all aquiver within the crook of her protecting arm.____'They will cast anchor near the boat-house,' murmured Belesa. 'Yes! There goes their anchor, a hundred yards offshore. Do not tremble so, child! They can not take the fort. Perhaps they wish only fresh water and supplies. Perhaps a storm blew them into these seas.'____'They are coming ashore in long boats!' exclaimed the child. 'Oh, my Lady, I am afraid! They are big men in armor! Look how the sun strikes fire from their pikes and burgonets! Will they eat us?'____Belesa burst into laughter in spite of her apprehension.____'Of course not! Who put that idea into your head?'____'Zingelito told me the Barachans eat women.'____'He was teasing you. The Barachans are cruel, but they are no worse than the Zingaran renegades who call themselves buccaneers. Zingelito was a buccaneer once.'____'He was cruel,' muttered the child. 'I'm glad the Picts cut his head off.'____'Hush, child.' Belesa shuddered slightly. 'You must not speak that way. Look, the pirates have reached the shore. They line the beach, and one of them is coming toward the fort. That must be Strom.'____'Ahoy, the fort there!' came a hail in a voice gusty as the wind. 'I come under a flag of truce!'____The Count's helmeted head appeared over the points of the palisade; his stern face, framed in steel, surveyed the pirate somberly. Strom had halted just within good earshot. He was a big man, bare-headed, his tawny hair blowing in the wind. Of all the sea-rovers who haunted the Barachans, none was more framed for deviltry than he.____'Speak!' commanded Valenso. 'I have scant desire to converse with one of your breed.'____Strom laughed with his lips, not with his eyes.____'When your galleon escaped me in that squall off the Tralli-bes last year I never thought to meet you again on the Pictish Coast, Valenso!' said he. 'Although at the time I wondered what your destination might be. By Mitra, had I known, I would have followed you then! I got the start of my life a little while ago when I saw your scarlet falcon floating over a fortress where I had thought to see naught but bare beach. You have found it, of course?'____'Found what?'

snapped the Count impatiently.____'Don't try to dissemble with me!' The pirate's stormy nature showed itself momentarily in a flash of impatience. 'I know why you came here - and I have come for the same reason. I don't intend to be balked. Where is your ship?'____'That is none of your affair.'____'You have none,' confidently asserted the pirate. 'I see pieces of a galleon's masts in that stockade. It must have been wrecked, somehow, after you landed here. If you'd had a ship you'd have sailed away with your plunder long ago.'____'What are you talking about, damn you?' yelled the Count. 'My plunder? Am I a Barachan to burn and loot? Even so, what would I loot on this naked coast?'____'That which you came to find,' answered the pirate coolly. 'The same thing I'm after - and mean to have. But I'll be easy to deal with - just give me the loot and I'll go my way and leave you in peace.'____'You must be mad,' snarled Valenso. 'I came here to find solitude and seclusion, which I enjoyed until you crawled out of the sea, you yellow-headed dog. Begone! I did not ask for a parley, and I weary of this empty talk. Take your rogues and go your ways.'____'When I go I'll leave that hovel in ashes!' roared the pirate in a transport of rage. 'For the last time - will you give me the loot in return for your lives? I have you hemmed in here, and a hundred and fifty men ready to cut your throats at my word.'____For answer the Count made a quick gesture with his hand below the points of the palisade. Almost instantly a shaft hummed venomously through a loop-hole and splintered on Strom's breastplate. The pirate yelled ferociously, bounded back and ran toward the beach, with arrows whistling all about him. His men roared and came on like a wave, blades gleaming in the sun.____'Curse you, dog!' raved the Count, felling the offending archer with his iron-clad fist. 'Why did you not strike his throat above the gorget? Ready with your bows, men - here they come!'____But Strom had reached his men, checked their headlong rush. The pirates spread out in a long line that overlapped the extremities of the western wall, and advanced warily, loosing their shafts as they came. Their weapon was the longbow, and their archery was superior to that of the Zingarans. But the latter were protected by their barrier. The long arrows arched over the stockade and quivered upright in the earth. One struck the window-sill over which Belesa watched, wringing a cry of fear from Tina, who cringed back, her wide eyes fixed on the venomous vibrating shaft.____The Zingarans sent their bolts and hunting arrows in return, aiming and loosing without undue haste. The women had herded the children into their huts and now stoically awaited whatever fate the gods had in store for them.____The Barachans were famed for their furious and headlong style of battling, but they were weary as they were ferocious, and did not intend to waste their strength vainly in direct charges against the ramparts. They maintained their widespread formation, creeping along and taking advantage of every natural depression and bit of vegetation - which was not much, for the ground had been cleared on all sides of the fort against the threat of Pictish raids.____A few bodies lay prone on the sandy earth, back-pieces glinting in the sun, quarrel shafts standing up from arm-pit or neck. But the pirates were quick as cats, always shirting their position, and were protected by their light armor. Their constant raking fire was a continual menace to the men in the stockade. Still, it was evident that as long as the battle remained an exchange of archery, the advantage must remain with the sheltered Zingarans.____But down at the boat-house on the beach, men were at work with axes. The Count cursed sulphurously when he saw the havoc they were making among his boats, which had been built laboriously of planks sawn out of solid logs.____'They're making a

mantlet, curse them!' he raged. 'A sally now, before they complete it - while they're scattered?'___Galbro shook his head, glancing at the bare-armed henchmen with their clumsy pikes.___'Their arrows would riddle us, and we'd be no match for them in hand-to-hand fighting. We must keep behind our walls and trust to our archers.'___'Well enough,' growled Valenso. 'If we can keep them outside our walls.'___Presently the intention of the pirates became apparent to all, as a group of some thirty men advanced, pushing before them a great shield made out of the planks from the boats, and the timbers of the boat-house itself. They had found an ox-cart, and mounted the mantlet on the wheels, great solid disks of oak. As they rolled it ponderously before them it hid them from the sight of the defenders except for glimpses of their moving feet.___It rolled toward the gate, and the straggling line of archers converged toward it, shooting as they ran.___'Shoot!' yelled Valenso, going livid. 'Stop them before they reach the gate!''___A storm of arrows whistled across the palisade, and feathered themselves harmlessly in the thick wood. A derisive yell answered the volley. Shafts were finding loop-holes now, as the rest of the pirates drew nearer, and a soldier reeled and fell from the ledge, gasping and choking, with a clothyard shaft through his throat.___'Shoot at their feet!' screamed Valenso; and then - 'Forty men at the gate with pikes and axes! The rest hold the wall!''___Bolts ripped into the sand before the moving shield. A bloodthirsty howl announced that one had found its target beneath the edge, and a man staggered into view, cursing and hopping as he strove to withdraw the quarrel that skewered his foot. In an instant he was feathered by a dozen hunting arrows.___But, with a deep-throated shout, the mantlet was pushed to the wall, and a heavy, iron-tipped boom, thrust through an aperture in the center of the shield, began to thunder on the gate, driven by arms knotted with brawny muscles and backed with blood-thirsty fury. The massive gate groaned and staggered, while from the stockade bolts poured in a steady hail and some struck home. But the wild men of the sea were afire with the fighting-lust.___With deep shouts they swung the ram, and from all sides the others closed in, braving the weakened fire from the walls, and shooting fast and hard.___Cursing like a madman, the Count sprang from the wall and ran to the gate, drawing his sword. A clump of desperate men-at-arms closed in behind him, gripping their spears. In another moment the gate would cave in and they must stop the gap with their living bodies.___Then a new note entered the clamor of the melee. It was a trumpet, blaring stridently from the ship. On the cross-trees a figure waved his arms and gesticulated wildly.___That sound registered on Strom's ears, even as he lent his strength to the swinging ram. Exerting his mighty thews he resisted the surge of the other arms, bracing his legs to halt the ram on its backward swing. He turned his head, sweat dripping from his face.___'Wait!' he roared. 'Wait, damn you! Listen!''___In the silence that followed that bull's bellow, the blare of the trumpet was plainly heard, and a voice that shouted something unintelligible to the people inside the stockade.___But Strom understood, for his voice was lifted again in profane command. The ram was released, and the mantlet began to recede from the gate as swiftly as it had advanced.___'Look!' cried Tina at her window, jumping up and down in her wild excitement. 'They are running! All of them! They are running to the beach! Look! They have abandoned the shield just out of range! They are leaping into the boats and rowing for the ship! Oh, my Lady, have we won?''___'I think not!' Belesa was staring sea-ward. 'Look!''___She threw the curtains aside and leaned from the window. Her clear young voice rose above the amazed

shouts of the defenders, turned their heads in the direction she pointed. They sent up a deep yell as they saw another ship swinging majestically around the southern point. Even as they looked she broke out the royal golden flag of Zingara. ___Strom's pirates were swarming up the sides of their carack, heaving up the anchor. Before the stranger had progressed halfway across the bay, the Red Hand was vanishing around the point of the northern horn. _____3 The Coming of the Black Man _____ 'Out, quick!' snapped the Count, tearing at the bars of the gate. 'Destroy that mantlet before these strangers can land!' ___ 'But Strom has fled,' expostulated Galbro, 'and yonder ship is Zingaran.' ___ 'Do as I order!' roared Valenso. 'My enemies are not all foreigners! Out, dogs! Thirty of you, with axes, and make kindling wood of that mantlet. Bring the wheels into the stockade.' ___ Thirty axemen raced down toward the beach, brawny men in sleeveless tunics, their axes gleaming in the sun. The manner of their lord had suggested a possibility of peril in that oncoming ship, and there was panic in their haste. The splintering of the timbers under their flying axes came plainly to the people inside the fort, and the axemen were racing back across the sands, trundling the great oaken wheels with them, before the Zingaran ship had dropped anchor where the pirate ship had stood. ___ 'Why does not the Count open the gate and go down to meet them?' wondered Tina. 'Is he afraid that the man he fears might be on that ship?' ___ 'What do you mean, Tina?' Belesa demanded uneasily. The Count had never vouchsafed a reason for this self-exile. He was not the sort of a man to run from an enemy, though he had many. But this conviction of Tina's was disquieting; almost uncanny. ___ Tina seemed not to have heard her question. ___ 'The axemen are back in the stockade,' she said. 'The gate is closed again and barred. The men still keep their places along the wall. If that ship was chasing Strom, why did it not pursue him? But it is not a war-ship. It is a carack, like the other. Look, a boat is coming ashore. I see a man in the bow, wrapped in a dark cloak.' ___ The boat having grounded, this man came pacing leisurely up the sands, followed by three others. He was a tall, wiry man, clad in black silk and polished steel. ___ 'Halt!' roared the Count. 'I will parley with your leader alone!' ___ The taller stranger removed his morion and made a sweeping bow. His companions halted, drawing their wide cloaks about them, and behind them the sailors leaned on their oars and stared at the flag floating over the palisade. ___ When he came within easy call of the gate: 'Why surely,' said he, 'there should be no suspicion between gentlemen in these naked seas!' ___ Valenso stared at him suspiciously. The stranger was dark, with a lean, predatory face, and a thin black mustache. A bunch of lace was gathered at his throat, and there was lace on his wrists. ___ 'I know you,' said Valenso slowly. 'You are Black Zarono, the buccaneer.' ___ Again the stranger bowed with stately elegance. ___ 'And none could fail to recognize the red falcon of the Korzettas!' ___ 'It seems this coast has become the rendezvous of all the rogues of the southern seas,' growled Valenso. 'What do you wish?' ___ 'Come, come, sir!' remonstrated Zarono. This is a churlish greeting to one who has just rendered you a service. Was not that Argossean dog, Strom, just thundering at your gate? And did he not take to his sea-heels when he saw me round the point?' ___ 'True,' grunted the Count grudgingly. 'Though there is little to choose between a pirate and a renegade.' ___ Zarono laughed without resentment and twirled his mustache. ___ 'You are blunt in speech, my Lord. But I desire only leave to anchor in your bay, to let my men hunt for meat and water in your woods, and perhaps, to drink a glass of wine myself at your

board.'___'I see not how I can stop you,' growled Valenso. 'But understand this, Zarono: no man of your crew conies within this palisade. If one approaches closer than a hundred feet, he will presently find an arrow through his gizzard. And I charge you do no harm to my gardens or the cattle in the pens. Three steers you may have for fresh meat, but no more. And we can hold this fort against your ruffians, in case you think otherwise.'___'You were not holding it very successfully against Strom,' the buccaneer pointed out with a mocking smile.___'You'll find no wood to build mantlets unless you chop down trees, or strip it from your own ship,' assured the Count grimly. 'And your men are not Barachan archers; they're no better bowmen than mine. Besides, what little loot you'd find in this castle would not be worth the price.'___'Who speaks of loot and warfare?' protested Zarono. 'Nay, my men are sick to stretch their legs ashore, and nigh to scurvy from chewing salt pork. I guarantee their good conduct. May they come ashore?'___Valenso grudgingly signified his content, and Zarono bowed, a thought sardonically, and retired with a tread as measured and stately as if he trod the polished crystal floor of the Kordava royal court, where indeed, unless rumor lied, he had once been a familiar figure.___'Let no man leave the stockade,' Valenso ordered Galibro. 'I do not trust that renegade dog. Because he drove Strom from our gate is no guarantee that he would not cut our throats.'___Galbro nodded. He was well aware of the enmity which existed between the pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. The pirates were mainly Argossean sailors, turned outlaw; to the ancient feud between Argos and Zingara was added, in the case of the freebooters, the rivalry of opposing interests. Both breeds preyed on the shipping and the coastal towns; and they preyed on one another with equal rapacity.___So no one stirred from the palisade while the buccaneers came ashore, dark-faced men in flaming silk and polished steel, with scarfs bound about their heads and gold hoops in their ears. They camped on the beach, a hundred and seventy-odd of them, and Valenso noticed that Zarono posted lookouts on both points. They did not molest the gardens, and only the three beeves designated by Valenso, shouting from the palisade, were driven forth and slaughtered. Fires were kindled on the strand, and a wattled cask of ale was brought ashore and broached.___Other kegs were filled with water from the spring that rose a short distance south of the fort, and men began to straggle toward the woods, crossbows in their hands. Seeing this, Valenso was moved to shout to Zarono, striding back and forth through the camp: 'Don't let your men go into the forest. Take another steer from the pens if you haven't enough meat. If they go trampling into the woods they may fall foul of the Picts.___'Whole tribes of the painted devils live back in the forest. We beat off an attack shortly after we landed, and since then six of my men have been murdered in the forest, at one time or another. There's peace between us just now, but it hangs by a thread. Don't risk stirring them up.'___Zarono shot a startled glance at the lowering woods, as if he expected to see hordes of savage figures lurking there. Then he bowed and said: 'I thank you for the warning, my Lord.' And he shouted for his men to come back, in a rasping voice that contrasted strangely with his courtly accents when addressing the Count.___If Zarono could have penetrated the leafy mask he would have been more apprehensive, if he could have seen the sinister figure that lurked there, watching the strangers with inscrutable black eyes - a hideously painted warrior, naked but for a doeskin breech-clout, with a toucan feather drooping over his left ear.___As evening drew on, a thin skim of gray crawled up from the sea-rim and overcast the sky. The sun sank in a wallow of

crimson, touching the tips of the black waves with blood. Fog crawled out of the sea and lapped at the feet of the forest, curling about the stockade in smoky wisps. The fires on the beach shone dull crimson through the mist, and the singing of the buccaneers seemed deadened and far away. They had brought old sail-canvas from the carack and made them shelters along the strand, where beef was still roasting, and the ale granted them by their captain was doled out sparingly.____The great gate was shut and barred. Soldiers stolidly tramped the ledges of the palisade, pike on shoulder, beads of moisture glistening on their steel caps. They glanced uneasily at the fires on the beach, stared with greater fixity toward the forest, now a vague dark line in the crawling fog. The compound lay empty of life, a bare, darkened space. Candles gleamed feebly through the crack of the huts, and light streamed from the windows of the manor. There was silence except for the tread of the sentries, the drip of water from the eaves, and the distant singing of the buccaneers.____Some faint echo of this singing penetrated into the great hall where Valenso sat at wine with his unsolicited guest.____'Your men make merry, sir,' grunted the Count.____'They are glad to feel the sand under their feet again,' answered Zarono. 'It has been a wearisome voyage - yes, a long, stern chase.' He lifted his goblet gallantly to the unresponsive girl who sat on his host's right, and drank ceremoniously.____Impassive attendants ranged the walls, soldiers with pikes and helmets, servants in satin coats. Valenso's household in this wild land was a shadowy reflection of the court he had kept in Kordava.____The manor house, as he insisted on calling it, was a marvel for that coast. A hundred men had worked night and day for months building it. Its log-walled exterior was devoid of ornamentation, but, within, it was as nearly a copy of Korzetta Castle as was possible. The logs that composed the walls of the hall were hidden with heavy silk tapestries, worked in gold. Ship beams, stained and polished, formed the beams of the lofty ceiling. The floor was covered with rich carpets. The broad stair that led up from the hall was likewise carpeted, and its massive balustrade had once been a galleon's rail.____A fire in the wide stone fireplace dispelled the dampness of the night. Candles in the great silver candelabrum in the center of the broad mahogany board lit the hall, throwing long shadows on the stair. Count Valenso sat at the head of that table, presiding over a company composed of his niece, his piratical guest, Galbro, and the captain of the guard. The smallness of the company emphasized the proportions of the vast board, where fifty guests might have sat at ease.____'You followed Strom?' asked Valenso. 'You drove him this far afield?'____'I followed Strom,' laughed Zarono, 'but he was not fleeing from me. Strom is not the man to flee from anyone. No; he came seeking for something; something I too desire.'____'What could tempt a pirate or a buccaneer to this naked land?' muttered Valenso, staring into the sparkling contents of his goblet.____'What could tempt a count of Kordava?' retorted Zarono, and an avid light burned an instant in his eyes.____'The rottenness of a royal court might sicken a man of honor,' remarked Valenso.____'Korzettas of honor have endured its rottenness with tranquillity for several generations,' said Zarono bluntly. 'My Lord, indulge my curiosity - why did you sell your lands, load your galleon with the furnishings of your castle and sail over the horizon out of the knowledge of the king and the nobles of Zingara? And why settle here, when your sword and your name might carve out a place for you in any civilized land?'____Valenso toyed with the golden seal-chain about his neck.____'As to why I left Zingara,' he said, 'that is my own affair. But it was chance that left me stranded here. I had brought all

my people ashore, and much of the furnishings you mentioned, intending to build a temporary habitation. But my ship, anchored out there in the bay, was driven against the cliffs of the north point and wrecked by a sudden storm out of the west. Such storms are common enough at certain times of the year. After that there was naught to do but remain and make the best of it.'___'Then you would return to civilization, if you could?'___'Not to Kordava. But perhaps to some far clime - to Vendhya, or Khitai?'___'Do you not find it tedious here, my Lady?' asked Zarono, for the first time addressing himself directly to Belesa.___Hunger to see a new face and hear a new voice had brought the girl to the great hall that night. But now she wished she had remained in her chamber with Tina. There was no mistaking the meaning in the glance Zarono turned on her. His speech was decorous and formal, his expression sober and respectful; but it was but a mask through which gleamed the violent and sinister spirit of the man. He could not keep the burning desire out of his eyes when he looked at the aristocratic young beauty in her low-necked satin gown and jeweled girdle. 'There is little diversity here,' she answered in a low voice.___'If you had a ship,' Zarono bluntly asked his host, 'you would abandon this settlement?'___'Perhaps,' admitted the Count.___'I have a ship,' said Zarono. 'If we could reach an agreement?'___'What sort of an agreement?' Valenso lifted his head to stare suspiciously at his guest.___'Share and share alike,' said Zarono, laying his hand on the board with the fingers spread wide. The gesture was curiously reminiscent of a great spider. But the fingers quivered with curious tension, and the buccaneer's eyes burned with a new light.___'Share what?' Valenso stared at him in evident bewilderment. 'The gold I brought with me went down in my ship, and unlike the broken timbers, it did not wash ashore.'___'Not that!' Zarono made an impatient gesture. 'Let us be frank, my Lord. Can you pretend it was chance which caused you to land at this particular spot, with a thousand miles of coast from which to choose?'___'There is no need for me to pretend,' answered Valenso coldly. 'My ship's master was one Zingelito, formerly a buccaneer. He had sailed this coast, and persuaded me to land here, telling me he had a reason he would later disclose. But this reason he never divulged, because the day after we landed he disappeared into the woods, and his headless body was found later by a hunting party. Obviously he was ambushed and slain by the Picts.'___Zarono stared fixedly at Valenso for a space.___'Sink me,' quoth he at last, 'I believe you, my Lord. A Korzetta has no skill at lying, regardless of his other accomplishments. And I will make you a proposal. I will admit when I anchored out there in the bay I had other plans in mind. Supposing you to have already secured the treasure, I meant to take this fort by strategy and cut all your throats. But circumstances have caused me to change my mind?' He cast a glance at Belesa that brought the color into her face, and made her lift her head indignantly.___'I have a ship to carry you out of exile,' said the buccaneer, 'with your household and such of your retainers as you shall choose. The rest can fend for themselves.'___The attendants along the walls shot uneasy glances sidelong at each other. Zarono went on, too brutally cynical to conceal his intentions.___'But first you must help me secure the treasure for which I've sailed a thousand miles.'___'What treasure, in Mitra's name?' demanded the Count angrily. 'You are yammering like that dog Strom, now.'___'Did you ever hear of Bloody Tranicos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?' asked Zarono.___'Who has not? It was he who stormed the island castle of the exiled prince Tothmekri of Stygia, put the people to the sword and bore off the treasure the prince had

brought with him when he fled from Khemi.'___'Aye! And the tale of that treasure brought the men of the Red Brotherhood swarming like vultures after carrion - pirates, buccaneers, even the black corsairs from the South. Fearing betrayal by his captains, he fled northward with one ship, and vanished from the knowledge of men. That was nearly a hundred years ago.'___'But the tale persists that one man survived that last voyage, and returned to the Barachans, only to be captured by a Zingaran war-ship. Before he was hanged he told his story and drew a map in his own blood, on parchment, which he smuggled somehow out of his captor's reach. This was the tale he told: Tranicos had sailed far beyond the paths of shipping, until he came to a bay on a lonely coast, and there he anchored. He went ashore, taking his treasure and eleven of his most trusted captains who had accompanied him on his ship. Following his orders, the ship sailed away, to return in a week's time, and pick up their admiral and his captains. In the meantime Tranicos meant to hide the treasure somewhere in the vicinity of the bay. The ship returned at the appointed time, but there was no trace of Tranicos and his eleven captains, except the rude dwelling they had built on the beach.'___'This had been demolished, and there were tracks of naked feet about it, but no sign to show there had been any fighting. Nor was there any trace of the treasure, or any sign to show where it was hidden. The pirates plunged into the forest to search for their chief and his captains, but were attacked by wild Picts and driven back to their ship. In despair they heaved anchor and sailed away, but before they raised the Barachans, a terrific storm wrecked the ship and only that one man survived.'___'That is the tale of the Treasure of Tranicos, which men have sought in vain for nearly a century. That the map exists is known, but its whereabouts have remained a mystery.'___'I have had one glimpse of that map. Strom and Zingelito were with me, and a Nemedian who sailed with the Barachans. We looked upon it in a hovel in a certain Zingaran sea-port town, where we were skulking in disguise. Somebody knocked over the lamp, and somebody howled in the dark, and when we got the light on again, the old miser who owned the map was dead with a dirk in his heart, and the map was gone, and the night-watch was clattering down the street with their pikes to investigate the clamor. We scattered, and each went his own way.'___'For years thereafter Strom and I watched one another, each supposing the other had the map. Well, as it turned out, neither had it, but recently word came to me that Strom had departed northward, so I followed him. You saw the end of that chase.'___'I had but a glimpse at the map as it lay on the old miser's table, and could tell nothing about it. But Strom's actions show that he knows this is the bay where Tranicos anchored. I believe that they hid the treasure somewhere in that forest and returning, were attacked and slain by the Picts. The Picts did not get the treasure. Men have traded up and down this coast a little, knowing nothing of the treasure, and no gold ornament or rare jewel has ever been seen in the possession of the coastal tribes.'___'This is my proposal: let us combine our forces. Strom is somewhere within striking distance. He fled because he feared to be pinned between us, but he will return. But allied, we can laugh at him. We can work out from the fort, leaving enough men here to hold it if he attacks. I believe the treasure is hidden near by. Twelve men could not have conveyed it far. We will find it, load it in my ship, and sail for some foreign port where I can cover my past with gold. I am sick of this life. I want to go back to a civilized land, and live like a noble, with riches, and slaves, and a castle - and a wife of noble blood.'___'Well?' demanded the Count, slit-eyed with suspicion.'___'Give me your niece for my

wife,' demanded the buccaneer bluntly.____Belesa cried out sharply and started to her feet. Valenso likewise rose, livid, his fingers knotting convulsively about his goblet as if he contemplated hurling it at his guest. Zaronno did not move; he sat still, one arm on the table and the fingers hooked like talons. His eyes smoldered with passion, and a deep menace.____'You dare!' ejaculated Valenso.____'You seem to forget you have fallen from your high estate, Count Valenso,' growled Zaronno. 'We are not at the Kordavan court, my Lord. On this naked coast nobility is measured by the power of men and arms. And there I rank you. Strangers tread Korzetta Castle, and the Korzetta fortune is at the bottom of the sea. You will die here, an exile, unless I give you the use of my ship.____'You will have no cause to regret the union of our houses. With a new name and a new fortune you will find that Black Zaronno can take his place among the aristocrats of the world and make a son-in-law of which not even a Korzetta need be ashamed.'____'You are mad to think of it!' exclaimed the Count violently. 'You? who is that?'____A patter of soft-slipped feet distracted his attention. Tina came hurriedly into the hall, hesitated when she saw the Count's eyes fixed angrily on her, curtsied deeply, and sidled around the table to thrust her small hands into Belesa's fingers. She was panting slightly, her slippers were damp, and her flaxen hair was plastered down on her head.____'Tina!' exclaimed Belesa anxiously. 'Where have you been? I thought you were in your chamber, hours ago.'____'I was,' answered the child breathlessly, 'but I missed my coral necklace you gave me?' She held it up, a trivial trinket, but prized beyond all her other possessions because it had been Belesa's first gift to her. 'I was afraid you wouldn't let me go if you knew - a soldier's wife helped me out of the stockade and back again - please, my Lady, don't make me tell who she was, because I promised not to. I found my necklace by the pool where I bathed this morning. Please punish me if I have done wrong.'____'Tina!' groaned Belesa, clasping the child to her. 'I'm not going to punish you. But you should not have gone outside the palisade, with these buccaneers camped on the beach, and always a chance of Picts skulking about. Let me take you to your chamber and change these damp clothes?'____'Yes, my Lady,' murmured Tina, 'but first let me tell you about the black man?'____'What?' The startling interruption was a cry that burst from Valenso's lips. His goblet clattered to the floor as he caught the table with both hands. If a thunderbolt had struck him, the lord of the castle's bearing could not have been more subtly or horrifyingly altered. His face was livid, his eyes almost starting from his head.____'What did you say?' he panted, glaring wildly at the child who shrank back against Belesa in bewilderment. 'What did you say, wench?'____'A black man, my Lord,' she stammered, while Belesa, Zaronno and the attendants stared at him in amazement. 'When I went down to the pool to get my necklace, I saw him. There was a strange moaning in the wind, and the sea whimpered like a thing in fear, and then he came. I was afraid, and hid behind a little ridge of sand. He came from the sea in a strange black boat with blue fire playing all about it, but there was no torch. He drew his boat up on the sands below the south point, and strode toward the forest, looking like a giant in the fog - a great, tall man, black like a Kushite?'____Valenso reeled as if he had received a mortal blow. He clutched at his throat, snapping the golden chain in his violence. With the face of a madman he lurched about the table and tore the child screaming from Belesa's arms.____'You little slut,' he panted. 'You lie! You have heard me mumbling in my sleep and have told this lie to torment me! Say you lie before I tear the skin from your back!'____'Uncle!' cried Belesa, in outraged bewilderment,

trying to free Tina from his grasp. 'Are you mad? What are you about?'___With a snarl he tore her hand from his arm and spun her staggering into the arms of Galbro who received her with a leer he made little effort to disguise.___'Mercy, my Lord!' sobbed Tina. 'I did not lie!'___'I said you lied!' roared Valenso. 'Gebbrelo!'___The stolid serving man seized the trembling youngster and stripped her with one brutal wrench that tore her scanty garments from her body. Wheeling, he drew her slender arms over his shoulders, lifting her writhing feet clear of the floor.___'Uncle! shrieked Belesa, writhing vainly in Galbro's lustful grasp. 'You are mad! You can not - oh, you can not?!' The voice choked in her throat as Valenso caught up a jewel-hiked riding whip and brought it down across the child's frail body with a savage force that left a red weal across her naked shoulders.___Belesa moaned, sick with the anguish in Tina's shriek. The world had suddenly gone mad. As in a nightmare she saw the stolid faces of the soldiers and servants, beast-faces, the faces of oxen, reflecting neither pity nor sympathy. Zarono's faintly sneering face was part of the nightmare. Nothing in that crimson haze was real except Tina's naked white body, crisscrossed with red welts from shoulders to knees; no sound real except the child's sharp cries of agony, and the panting gasps of Valenso as he lashed away with the staring eyes of a madman, shrieking: 'You lie! You lie! Curse you, you lie! Admit your guilt, or I will flay your stubborn body! He could not have followed me here?'___'Oh, have mercy, my Lord!' screamed the child, writhing vainly on the brawny servant's back, too frantic with fear and pain to have the wit to save herself by a lie. Blood trickled in crimson beads down her quivering thighs. 'I saw him! I do not lie! Mercy! Please! Ahhhh!'___'You fool! You fool? screamed Belesa, almost beside herself. 'Do you not see she is telling the truth? Oh, you beast! Beast! Beast!'___Suddenly some shred of sanity seemed to return to the brain of Count Valenso Korzetta. Dropping the whip he reeled back and fell up against the table, clutching blindly at its edge. He shook as with an ague. His hair was plastered across his brow in dank strands, and sweat dripped from his livid countenance which was like a carven mask of Fear. Tina, released by Gebbrelo, slipped to the floor in a whimpering heap. Belesa tore free from Galbro, rushed to her, sobbing, and fell on her knees, gathering the pitiful waif into her arms. She lifted a terrible face to her uncle, to pour upon him the full vials of her wrath - but he was not looking at her. He seemed to have forgotten both her and his victim. In a daze of incredulity, she heard him say to the buccaneer: 'I accept your offer, Zarono; in Mitra's name, let us find this accursed treasure and begone from this damned coast!'___At this the fire of her fury sank to sick ashes. In stunned silence she lifted the sobbing child in her arms and carried her up the stair. A glance backward showed Valenso crouching rather than sitting at the table, gulping wine from a huge goblet he gripped in both shaking hands, while Zarono towered over him like a somber predatory bird - puzzled at the turn of events, but quick to take advantage of the shocking change that had come over the Count. He was talking in a low, decisive voice, and Valenso nodded mute agreement, like one who scarcely heeds what is being said. Galbro stood back in the shadows, chin pinched between forefinger and thumb, and the attendants along the walls glanced furtively at each other, bewildered by their lord's collapse.___Up in her chamber Belesa laid the half-fainting girl on the bed and set herself to wash and apply soothing ointments to the weals and cuts on her tender skin. Tina gave herself up in complete submission to her mistress's hands, moaning faintly. Belesa felt as if her world had

fallen about her ears. She was sick and bewildered, overwrought, her nerves quivering from the brutal shock of what she had witnessed. Fear of and hatred for her uncle grew in her soul. She had never loved him; he was harsh and apparently without natural affection, grasping and avid. But she had considered him just, and fearless. Revulsion shook her at the memory of his staring eyes and bloodless face. It was some terrible fear which had roused this frenzy; and because of this fear Valenso had brutalized the only creature she had to love and cherish; because of that fear he was selling her, his niece, to an infamous outlaw. What was behind this madness? Who was the black man Tina had seen?___The child muttered in semi-delirium.___'I did not lie, my Lady! Indeed I did not! It was a black man, in a black boat that burned like blue fire on the water! A tall man, black as a negro, and wrapped in a black cloak! I was afraid when I saw him, and my blood ran cold. He left his boat on the sands and went into the forest. Why did the Count whip me for seeing him?'___'Hush, Tina,' soothed Belesa. 'Lie quiet. The smarting will soon pass.'___The door opened behind her and she whirled, snatching up a jeweled dagger. The Count stood in the door, and her flesh crawled at the sight. He looked years older; his face was grey and drawn, and his eyes stared in a way that roused fear in her bosom. She had never been close to him; now she felt as though a gulf separated them. He was not her uncle who stood there, but a stranger come to menace her.___She lifted the dagger.___'If you touch her again,' she whispered from dry lips, 'I swear before Mitra I will sink this blade in your breast.'___He did not heed her.___'I have posted a strong guard about the manor,' he said. 'Zarono brings his men into the stockade tomorrow. He will not sail until he has found the treasure. When he finds it we shall sail at once for some port not yet decided upon.'___'And you will sell me to him?' she whispered. 'In Mitra's name?'___He fixed upon her a gloomy gaze in which all considerations but his own self-interest had been crowded out. She shrank before it, seeing in it the frantic cruelty that possessed the man in his mysterious fear.___'You will do as I command,' he said presently, with no more human feeling in his voice than there is in the ring of flint on steel. And turning, he left the chamber. Blinded by a sudden rush of horror, Belesa fell fainting beside the couch where Tina lay._____4 A Black Drum Droning_____Belesa never knew how long she lay crushed and senseless. She was first aware of Tina's arms about her and the sobbing of the child in her ear. Mechanically she straightened herself and drew the girl into her arms; and she sat there, dry-eyed, staring unseeingly at the flickering candle. There was no sound in the castle. The singing of the buccaneers on the strand had ceased. Dully, almost impersonally she reviewed her problem.___Valenso was mad, driven frantic by the story of the mysterious black man. It was to escape this stranger that he wished to abandon the settlement and flee with Zarono. That much was obvious. Equally obvious was the fact that he was ready to sacrifice her in exchange for that opportunity to escape. In the blackness of spirit which surrounded her she saw no glint of light. The serving men were dull or callous brutes, their women stupid and apathetic. They would neither dare nor care to help her. She was utterly helpless.___Tina lifted her tear-stained face as if she were listening to the prompting of some inner voice. The child's understanding of Belesa's inmost thoughts was almost uncanny, as was her recognition of the inexorable drive of Fate and the only alternative left to the weak.___'We must go, my Lady!' she whispered. 'Zarono shall not have you. Let us go far away into the forest. We shall go until we can go no further, and then we shall lie down and die

together.'___The tragic strength that is the last refuge of the weak entered Belesa's soul. It was the only escape from the shadows that had been closing in upon her since that day when they fled from Zingara.'___'We shall go, child.'___She rose and was fumbling for a cloak, when an exclamation from Tina brought her about. The girl was on her feet, a finger pressed to her lips, her eyes wide and bright with terror.'___'What is it, Tina?' The child's expression of fright induced Belesa to pitch her voice to a whisper, and a nameless apprehension crawled over her.'___'Someone outside in the hall,' whispered Tina, clutching her arm convulsively. 'He stopped at our door, and then went on, toward the Count's chamber at the other end.'___'Your ears are keener than mine,' murmured Belesa. 'But there is nothing strange in that. It was the Count himself, perchance, or Galbro.' She moved to open the door, but Tina threw her arms frantically about her neck, and Belesa felt the wild beating of her heart.'___'No, no, my Lady! Do not open the door! I am afraid! I do not know why, but I feel that some evil thing is skulking near us!'___Impressed, Belesa patted her reassuringly, and reached a hand toward the gold disk that masked the tiny peep-hole in the center of the door.'___'He is coming back!' shivered the girl. 'I hear him!'___Belesa heard something too - a curious stealthy pad which she knew, with a chill of nameless fear, was not the step of anyone she knew. Nor was it the step of Zarono, or any booted man. Could it be the buccaneer gliding along the hallway on bare, stealthy feet, to slay his host while he slept? She remembered the soldiers who would be on guard below. If the buccaneer had remained in the manor for the night, a man-at-arms would be posted before his chamber door. But who was that sneaking along the corridor? None slept upstairs besides herself, Tina and the Count, except Galbro.'___With a quick motion she extinguished the candle so it would not shine through the hole in the door, and pushed aside the gold disk. All the lights were out in the hall, which was ordinarily lighted by candles. Someone was moving along the darkened corridor. She sensed rather than saw a dim bulk moving past her doorway, but she could make nothing of its shape except that it was man-like. But a chill wave of terror swept over her; so she crouched dumb, incapable of the scream that froze behind her lips. It was not such terror as her uncle now inspired in her, or fear like her fear of Zarono, or even of the brooding forest. It was blind unreasoning terror that laid an icy hand on her soul and froze her tongue to her palate.'___The figure passed on to the stairhead, where it was limned momentarily against the faint glow that came up from below, and at the glimpse of that vague black image against the red, she almost fainted.'___She crouched there in the darkness, awaiting the outcry that would announce that the soldiers in the great hall had seen the intruder. But the manor remained silent; somewhere a wind wailed shrilly. That was all.'___Belesa's hands were moist with perspiration as she groped to relight the candle. She was still shaken with horror, though she could not decide just what there had been about that black figure etched against the red glow that had roused this frantic loathing in her soul. It was man-like in shape, but the outline was strangely alien - abnormal - though she could not clearly define that abnormality. But she knew that it was no human being that she had seen, and she knew that the sight had robbed her of all her new-found resolution. She was demoralized, incapable of action.'___The candle flared up, limning Tina's white face in the yellow glow.'___'It was the black man!' whispered Tina. 'I know! My blood turned cold, just as it did when I saw him on the beach. There are soldiers downstairs; why did they not see him? Shall we go and inform

the Count?' ___Belesa shook her head. She did not care to repeat the scene that had ensued upon Tina's first mention of the black man. At any event, she dared not venture out into that darkened hallway. ___'We dare not go into the forest!' shuddered Tina. 'He will be lurking there?' ___Belesa did not ask the girl how she knew the black man would be in the forest; it was the logical hiding-place for any evil thing, man or devil. And she knew Tina was right; they dared not leave the fort now. Her determination, which had not faltered at the prospect of certain death, gave way at the thought of traversing those gloomy woods with that black shambling creature at large among them. Helplessly she sat down and sank her face in her hands. ___Tina slept, presently, on the couch, whimpering occasionally in her sleep. Tears sparkled on her long lashes. She moved her smarting body uneasily in her restless slumber. Toward dawn Belesa was aware of a stifling quality in the atmosphere. She heard a low rumble of thunder somewhere off to seaward. Extinguishing the candle, which had burned to its socket, she went to a window whence she could see both the ocean and a belt of the forest behind the fort. ___The fog had disappeared, but out to sea a dusky mass was rising from the horizon. From it lightning flickered and the low thunder growled. An answering rumble came from the black woods. Startled, she turned and stared at the forest, a brooding black rampart. A strange rhythmic pulsing came to her ears - a droning reverberation that was not the roll of a Pictish drum. ___'The drum!' sobbed Tina, spasmodically opening and closing her fingers in her sleep. 'The black man - beating on a black drum - in the black woods! Oh, save us?!' ___Belesa shuddered. Along the eastern horizon ran a thin white line that presaged dawn. But that black cloud on the western rim writhed and billowed, swelling and expanding. She stared in amazement, for storms were practically unknown on that coast at that time of the year, and she had never seen a cloud like that one. ___It came pouring up over the world-rim in great boiling masses of blackness, veined with fire. It rolled and billowed with the wind in its belly. Its thundering made the air vibrate. And another sound mingled awesomely with the reverberations of the thunder - the voice of the wind, that raced before its coming. The inky horizon was torn and convulsed in the lightning flashes; afar to sea she saw the white-capped waves racing before the wind. She heard its droning roar, increasing in volume as it swept shoreward. But as yet no wind stirred on the land. The air was hot, breathless. There was a sensation of unreality about the contrast: out there wind and thunder and chaos sweeping inland; but here stifling stillness. Somewhere below her a shutter slammed, startling in the tense silence, and a woman's voice was lifted, shrill with alarm. But most of the people of the fort seemed sleeping, unaware of the oncoming hurricane. ___She realized that she still heard that mysterious droning drum-beat and she stared toward the black forest, her flesh crawling. She could see nothing, but some obscure instinct or intuition prompted her to visualize a black hideous figure squatting under black branches and enacting a nameless incantation on something that sounded like a drum? ___Desperately she shook off the ghoulish conviction, and looked sea-ward, as a blaze of lightning fairly split the sky. Outlined against its glare she saw the masts of Zarono's ship; she saw the tents of the buccaneers on the beach, the sandy ridges of the south point and the rock cliffs of the north point as plainly as by midday sun. Louder and louder rose the roar of the wind, and now the manor was awake. Feet came pounding up the stair, and Zarono's voice yelled, edged with fright. ___Doors slammed and Valenso answered him, shouting to be heard above the roar of the elements. ___'Why didn't you warn me of a storm

from the west?' howled the buccaneer. 'If the anchors don't hold?' ___ 'A storm never came from the west before, at this time of year!' shrieked Valenso, rushing from his chamber in his nightshirt, his face livid and his hair standing stiffly on end. 'This is the work of?' His words were drowned as he raced madly up the ladder that led to the lookout tower, followed by the swearing buccaneer. ___ Belesa crouched at her window, awed and deafened. Louder and louder rose the wind, until it drowned all other sound - all except that maddening droning that now rose like an inhuman chant of triumph. It roared inshore, driving before it a foaming league-long crest of white - and then all hell and destruction was loosed on that coast. Rain fell in driving torrents, sweeping the beaches with blind frenzy. The wind hit like a thunder-clap, making the timbers of the fort quiver. The surf roared over the sands, drowning the coals of the fires the seamen had built. In the glare of lightning Belesa saw, through the curtain of the slashing rain, the tents of the buccaneers whipped to ribbons and washed away, saw the men themselves staggering toward the fort, beaten almost to the sands by the fury of torrent and blast. ___ And limned against the blue glare she saw Zaron's ship, ripped loose from her moorings, driven headlong against the jagged cliffs that jutted up to receive her . . . _____ 5 A Man From the Wilderness ___ The storm had spent its fury. Full dawn rose in a clear blue rain-washed sky. As the sun rose in a blaze of fresh gold, bright-hued birds lifted a swelling chorus from the trees on whose broad leaves beads of water sparkled like diamonds, quivering in the gentle morning breeze. ___ At a small stream which wound over the sands to join the sea, hidden beyond a fringe of trees and bushes, a man bent to lave his hands and face. He performed his ablutions after the manner of his race, grunting lustily and splashing like a buffalo. But in the midst of these splashing he lifted his head suddenly, his tawny hair dripping and water running in rivulets over his brawny shoulders. He crouched in a listening attitude for a split second, then was on his feet and facing inland, sword in hand, all in one motion. And there he froze, glaring wide-mouthed. ___ A man as big as himself was striding toward him over the sands, making no attempt at stealth; and the pirate's eyes widened as he stared at the close-fitting silk breeches, high flaring-topped boots, wide-skirted coat and head-gear of a hundred years ago. There was a broad cutlass in the stranger's hand and unmistakable purpose in his approach. ___ The pirate went pale, as recognition blazed in his eyes. ___ 'You!' he ejaculated unbelievably. 'By Mitra! You!' ___ Oaths streamed from his lips as he heaved up his cutlass. The birds rose in flaming showers from the trees as the clang of steel interrupted their song. Blue sparks flew from the hacking blades, and the sand grated and ground under the stamping boot heels. Then the clash of steel ended in a chopping crunch, and one man went to his knees with a choking gasp. The hilt escaped his nerveless hand and he slid full-length on the sand which reddened with his blood. With a dying effort he fumbled at his girdle and drew something from it, tried to lift it to his mouth, and then stiffened convulsively and went limp. ___ The conqueror bent and ruthlessly tore the stiffening fingers from the object they crumpled in their desperate grasp. ___ Zaron and Valenso stood on the beach, staring at the driftwood their men were gathering - spars, pieces of masts, broken timbers. So savagely had the storm hammered Zaron's ship against the low cliffs that most of the salvage was match-wood. A short distance behind them stood Belesa, listening to their conversation, one arm about Tina. The girl was pale and listless, apathetic to whatever Fate held in store for her. She heard what the men said, but with little interest. She was crushed by

the realization that she was but a pawn in the game, however it was to be played out - whether it was to be a wretched life dragged out on that desolate coast, or a return, effected somehow, to some civilized land. ___Zarono cursed venomously, but Valenso seemed dazed. ___'This is not the time of year for storms from the west,' he muttered, staring with haggard eyes at the men dragging the wreckage up on the beach. 'It was not chance that brought that storm out of the deep to splinter the ship in which I meant to escape. Escape? I am caught like a rat in a trap, as it was meant. Nay, we are all trapped rats?' ___'I don't know what you're talking about,' snarled Zarono, giving a vicious yank at his mustache. 'I've been unable to get any sense out of you since that flaxen-haired slut upset you last night with her wild tale of black men coming out of the sea. But I do know that I'm not going to spend my life on this cursed coast. Ten of my men went to hell in the ship, but I've got a hundred and sixty more. You've got a hundred. There are tools in your fort, and plenty of trees in yonder forest. We'll build a ship. I'll set men to cutting down trees as soon as they get this drift dragged up out of the reach of the waves.' ___'It will take months,' muttered Valenso. ___'Well, is there any better way in which we could employ our time? We're here - and unless we build a ship we'll never get away. We'll have to rig up some kind of a sawmill, but I've never encountered anything yet that balked me long. I hope that storm smashed Strom to bits - the Argossean dog! While we're building the ship we'll hunt for old Tranicos' loot.' ___'We will never complete your ship,' said Valenso somberly. ___'You fear the Picts? We have enough men to defy them.' ___'I do not speak of the Picts. I speak of a black man.' ___Zarono turned on him angrily. 'Will you talk sense? Who is this accursed black man?' ___'Accursed indeed,' said Valenso, staring seaward. 'A shadow of mine own red-stained past risen up to hound me to hell. Because of him I fled Zingara, hoping to lose my trail in the great ocean. But I should have known he would smell me out at last.' ___'If such a man came ashore he must be hiding in the woods,' growled Zarono. 'We'll rake the forest and hunt him out.' ___Valenso laughed harshly. ___'Seek for a shadow that drifts before a cloud that hides the moon; grope in the dark for a cobra; follow a mist that steals out the swamp at midnight.' ___Zarono cast him an uncertain look, obviously doubting his sanity. ___'Who is this man? Have done with ambiguity.' ___'The shadow of my own mad cruelty and ambition; a horror came out of the lost ages; no man of mortal flesh and blood, but?' ___'Sail ho!' bawled the lookout on the north point. ___Zarono wheeled and his voice slashed the wind. ___'Do you know her?' ___'Aye!' the reply came back faintly. 'It's the Red Hand!' ___Zarono cursed like a wild man. ___'Strom! The devil takes care of his own! How could he ride out that blow?' The buccaneer's voice rose to a yell that carried up and down the strand. 'Back to the fort, you dogs!' ___Before the Red Hand, somewhat battered in appearance, nosed around the point, the beach was bare of human life, the palisade bristling with helmets and scarf-bound heads. The buccaneers accepted the alliance with the easy adaptability of adventurers, the henchmen with the apathy of serfs. ___Zarono ground his teeth as a longboat swung leisurely in to the beach, and he sighted the tawny head of his rival in the bow. The boat grounded, and Strom strode toward the fort alone. ___Some distance away he halted and shouted in a bull's bellow that carried clearly in the still morning. 'Ahoy, the fort! I want to parley!' ___'Well, why in hell don't you?' snarled Zarono. ___'The last time I approached under a flag of truce an arrow broke on my brisket!' roared the pirate. 'I want a promise it won't happen again!' ___'You have my promise!' called

Zarono sardonically. ___ 'Damn your promise, you Zingaran dog! I want Valenso's word.' ___ A measure of dignity remained to the Count. There was an edge of authority to his voice as he answered: 'Advance, but keep your men back. You will not be fired upon.' ___ 'That's enough for me,' said Strom instantly. 'Whatever a Korzetta's sins, once his word is given, you can trust him.' ___ He strode forward and halted under the gate, laughing at the hate-darkened visage Zarono thrust over at him. ___ 'Well, Zarono,' he taunted, 'you are a ship shorter than you were when I last saw you! But you Zingarans never were sailors.' ___ 'How did you save your ship, you Messantian gutter-scum?' snarled the buccaneer. ___ 'There's a cove some miles to the north protected by a high-ridged arm of land that broke the force of the gale,' answered Strom. 'I was anchored behind it. My anchors dragged, but they held me off the shore.' ___ Zarono scowled blackly. Valenso said nothing. He had not known of that cove. He had done scant exploring of his domain. Fear of the Picts and lack of curiosity had kept him and his men near the fort. The Zingarans were by nature neither explorers nor colonists. ___ 'I come to make a trade,' said Strom, easily. 'We've naught to trade with you save sword-strokes,' growled Zarono. ___ 'I think otherwise,' grinned Strom, thin-lipped. 'You tipped your hand when you murdered Galacus, my first mate, and robbed him. Until this morning I supposed that Valenso had Tranicos' treasure. But if either of you had it, you wouldn't have gone to the trouble of following me and killing my mate to get the map.' ___ 'The map?' Zarono ejaculated, stiffening. ___ 'Oh, don't dissemble!' laughed Strom, but anger blazed blue in his eyes. 'I know you have it. Picts don't wear boots!' ___ 'But?' began the Count, nonplussed, but fell silent as Zarono nudged him. ___ 'And if we have the map,' said Zarono, 'what have you to trade that we might require?' ___ 'Let me come into the fort,' suggested Strom. 'There we can talk.' ___ He was not so obvious as to glance at the men peering at them from along the wall, but his two listeners understood. And so did the men. Strom had a ship. That fact would figure in any bargaining, or battle. But it would carry just so many, regardless of who commanded; whoever sailed away in it, there would be some left behind. A wave of tense speculation ran along the silent throng at the palisade. ___ 'Your men will stay where they are,' warned Zarono, indicating both the boat drawn up on the beach, and the ship anchored out in the bay. ___ 'Aye. But don't get the idea that you can seize me and hold me for a hostage!' He laughed grimly. 'I want Valenso's word that I'll be allowed to leave the fort alive and unhurt within the hour, whether we come to terms or not.' ___ 'You have my pledge,' answered the Count. ___ 'All right, then. Open that gate and let's talk plainly.' ___ The gate opened and closed, the leaders vanished from sight, and the common men of both parties resumed their silent surveillance of each other: the men on the palisade, and the men squatting beside their boat, with a broad stretch of sand between; and beyond a strip of blue water, the carack, with steel caps glinting all along her rail. ___ On the broad stair, above the great hall, Belesa and Tina crouched, ignored by the men below. These sat about the broad table: Valenso, Galbro, Zarono and Strom. But for them the hall was empty. ___ Strom gulped wine and set the empty goblet on the table. ___ The frankness suggested by his bluff countenance was belied by the dancing lights of cruelty and treachery in his wide eyes. But he spoke bluntly enough. ___ 'We all want the treasure old Tranicos hid somewhere near this bay,' he said abruptly. 'Each has something the others need. Valenso has laborers, supplies, and a stockade to shelter us from the Picts. You, Zarono, have my map. I have a ship.' ___ 'What I'd like to

know,' remarked Zarono, 'is this: if you've had that map all these years, why haven't you come after the loot sooner?'___'I didn't have it. It was that dog, Zingelito, who knifed the old miser in the dark and stole the map. But he had neither ship nor crew, and it took him more than a year to get them. When he did come after the treasure, the Picts prevented his landing, and his men mutinied and made him sail back to Zingara. One of them stole the map from him, and recently sold it to me.'___'That was why Zingelito recognized the bay,' muttered Valenso.___'Did that dog lead you here, Count? I might have guessed it. Where is he?'___'Doubtless in hell, since he was once a buccaneer. The Picts slew him, evidently while he was searching in the woods for the treasure.'___'Good!' approved Strom heartily. 'Well, I don't know how you knew my mate was carrying the map. I trusted him, and the men trusted him more than they did me, so I let him keep it. But this morning he wandered inland with some of the others, got separated from them, and we found him sworded to death near the beach, and the map gone. The men were ready to accuse me of killing him, but I showed the fools the tracks left by his slayer, and proved to them that my feet wouldn't fit them. And I knew it wasn't any one of the crew, because none of them wear boots that make that sort of track. And Picts don't wear boots at all. So it had to be a Zingaran.___'Well, you've got the map, but you haven't got the treasure. If you had it, you wouldn't have let me inside the stockade. I've got you penned up in this fort. You can't get out to look for the loot, and even if you did get it, you have no ship to get away in.___'Now here's my proposal: Zarono, give me the map. And you, Valenso, give me fresh meat and other supplies. My men are nigh to scurvy after the long voyage. In return I'll take you three men, the Lady Belesa and her girl, and set you ashore within reach of some Zingaran port - or I'll put Zarono ashore near some buccaneer rendezvous if he prefers, since doubtless a noose awaits him in Zingara. And to clinch the bargain I'll give each of you a handsome share in the treasure.'___The buccaneer tugged his mustache meditatively. He knew that Strom would not keep any such pact, if made. Nor did Zarono even consider agreeing to his proposal. But to refuse bluntly would be to force the issue into a clash of arms. He sought his agile brain for a plan to outwit the pirate. He wanted Strom's ship as avidly as he desired the lost treasure.___'What's to prevent us from holding you captive and forcing your men to give us your ship in exchange for you?' he asked.___Strom laughed at him.___'Do you think I'm a fool? My men have orders to heave up the anchors and sail hence if I don't reappear within the hour, or if they suspect treachery. They wouldn't give you the ship, if you skinned me alive on the beach. Besides, I have the Count's word.'___'My pledge is not straw,' said Valenso somberly. 'Have done with threats, Zarono.'___Zarono did not reply, his mind wholly absorbed in the problem of getting possession of Strom's ship; of continuing the parley without betraying the fact that he did not have the map. He wondered who in Mitra's name did have the accursed map.___'Let me take my men away with me on your ship when we sail,' he said. 'I can not desert my faithful followers?'___Strom snorted.___'Why don't you ask for my cutlass to slit my gullet with? Desert your faithful - bah! You'd desert your brother to the devil if you could gain anything by it. No! You're not going to bring enough men aboard to give you a chance to mutiny and take my ship.'___'Give us a day to think it over,' urged Zarono, fighting for time.___Strom's heavy fist banged on the table, making the wine dance in the glasses.___'No, by Mitra! Give me my answer now!'___Zarono was on his feet, his black rage submerging his craftiness.___'You Barachan dog! I'll give you your

answer - in your guts?'___He tore aside his cloak, caught at his sword-hilt. Strom heaved up with a roar, his chair crashing backward to the floor. Valenso sprang up, spreading his arms between them as they faced one another across the board, jutting jaws close together, blades half drawn, faces convulsed.___'Gentlemen, have done! Zarono, he has my pledge?___'The foul fiends gnaw your pledge!' snarled Zarono.___'Stand from between us, my Lord,' growled the pirate, his voice thick with the killing lust. 'Your word was that I should not be treacherously treated. It shall be considered no violation of your pledge for this dog and me to cross swords in equal play.'___'Well spoken, Strom!' It was a deep, powerful voice behind them, vibrant with grim amusement. All wheeled and glared, open-mouthed. Up on the stair Belesa started up with an involuntary exclamation.___A man strode out from the hangings that masked a chamber door, and advanced toward the table without haste or hesitation. Instantly he dominated the group, and all felt the situation subtly charged with a new, dynamic atmosphere.___The stranger was as tall as either of the freebooters, and more powerfully built than either, yet for all his size he moved with pantherish suppleness in his high, flaring-topped boots. His thighs were cased in close-fitting breeches of white silk, his wide-skirted sky-blue coat open to reveal an open-necked white silken shirt beneath, and the scarlet sash that girdled his waist. There were silver acorn-shaped buttons on the coat, and it was adorned with gilt-worked cuffs and pocket-flaps, and a satin collar. A lacquered hat completed a costume obsolete by nearly a hundred years. A heavy cutlass hung at the wearer's hip.___'Conan!' ejaculated both freebooters together, and Valenso and Galbro caught their breath at that name.___'Who else?' The giant strode up to the table, laughing sardonically at their amazement.___'What - what do you here?' stuttered the seneschal. 'How come you here, uninvited and unannounced?'___'I climbed the palisade on the east side while you fools were arguing at the gate,' Conan answered. 'Every man in the fort was craning his neck westward. I entered the manor while Strom was being let in at the gate. I've been in that chamber there ever since, eavesdropping.'___'I thought you were dead,' said Zarono slowly. 'Three years ago the shattered hull of your ship was sighted off a reefy coast, and you were heard of on the Main no more.'___'I didn't drown with my crew,' answered Conan. 'It'll take a bigger ocean than that one to drown me.'___Up on the stair Tina was clutching Belesa in her excitement and staring through the balustrades with all her eyes.___'Conan! My Lady, it is Conan! Look! Oh, look!'___Belesa was looking; it was like encountering a legendary character in the flesh. Who of all the sea-folk had not heard the wild, bloody tales told of Conan, the wild rover who had once been a captain of the Barachan pirates, and one of the greatest scourges of the sea? A score of ballads celebrated his ferocious and audacious exploits. The man could not be ignored; irresistibly he had stalked into the scene, to form another, dominant element in the tangled plot. And in the midst of her frightened fascination, Belesa's feminine instinct prompted the speculation as to Conan's attitude toward her - would it be like Strom's brutal indifference, or Zarono's violent desire?___Valenso was recovering from the shock of finding a stranger within his very hall. He knew Conan was a Cimmerian, born and bred in the wastes of the far north, and therefore not amenable to the physical limitations which controlled civilized men. It was not so strange that he had been able to enter the fort undetected, but Valenso flinched at the reflection that other barbarians might duplicate that feat - the dark, silent Picts, for instance.___'What do you want here?' he demanded. 'Did you

come from the sea?'___'I came from the woods.' The Cimmerian jerked his head toward the east.___'You have been living with the Picts?' Valenso asked coldly.___A momentary anger flickered bluey in the giant's eyes. 'Even a Zingaran ought to know there's never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be,' he retorted with an oath. 'Our feud with them is older than the world. If you'd said that to one of my wilder brothers, you'd have found yourself with a split head. But I've lived among you civilized men long enough to understand your ignorance and lack of common courtesy - the churlishness that demands his business of a man who appears at your door out of a thousand-mile wilderness. Never mind that.' He turned to the two freebooters who stood staring glumly at him.___'From what I overheard,' quoth he, 'I gather there is some dissension over a map!'___'That is none of your affair,' growled Strom. ___'Is this it?' Conan grinned wickedly and drew from his pocket a crumpled object - a square of parchment, marked with crimson lines.___Strom stared violently, paling. 'My map!' he ejaculated. 'Where did you get it?' ___'From your mate, Galacus, when I killed him,' answered Conan with grim enjoyment.___'You dog!' raved Strom, turning on Zarono. 'You never had the map! You lied?'___'I didn't say I had it,' snarled Zarono. 'You deceived yourself. Don't be a fool. Conan is alone. If he had a crew he'd have already cut our throats. We'll take the map from him?' ___'You'll never touch it!' Conan laughed fiercely. Both men sprang at him, cursing. Stepping back he crumpled the parchment and cast it into the glowing coals of the fireplace. With an incoherent bellow Strom lunged past him, to be met with a buffet under the ear that stretched him half-senseless on the floor. Zarono whipped out his sword but before he could thrust, Conan's cutlass beat it out of his hand.___Zarono staggered against the table, with all hell in his eyes. Strom dragged himself erect, his eyes glazed, blood dripping from his bruised ear. Conan leaned slightly over the table, his outstretched cutlass just touched the breast of Count Valenso.___'Don't call for your soldiers, Count,' said the Cimmerian softly. 'Not a sound out of you - or from you, either, dog-face!'___His name for Galbro, who showed no intention of braving his wrath. 'The map's burned to ashes, and it'll do no good to spill blood. Sit down, all of you.'___Strom hesitated, made an abortive gesture toward his hilt, then shrugged his shoulders and sank sullenly into a chair. The others followed suit. Conan remained standing, towering over the table, while his enemies watched him with bitter eyes of hate.___'You were bargaining,' he said. 'That's all I've come to do.'___'And what have you to trade?' sneered Zarono.___'The treasure of Tranicos!'___'What?' All four men were on their feet, leaning toward him.___'Sit down!' he roared, banging his broad blade on the table. They sank back, tense and white with excitement.___He grinned in huge enjoyment of the sensation his words had caused.___'Yes! I found it before I got the map. That's why I burned the map. I don't need it. And now nobody will ever find it, unless I show him where it is.'___They stared at him with murder in their eyes.___'You're lying,' said Zarono without conviction. 'You've told us one lie already. You said you came from the woods, yet you say you haven't been living with the Picts. All men know this country is a wilderness, inhabited only by savages. The nearest outposts of civilization are the Aquilonian settlements on Thunder River, hundreds of miles to eastward.'___'That's where I came from,' replied Conan imperturbably. 'I believe I'm the first white man to cross the Pictish Wilderness. I crossed Thunder River to follow a raiding party that had been harrying the frontier. I followed them deep into the wilderness, and killed their chief, but was knocked senseless by a stone from a

sling during the melee, and the dogs captured me alive. They were Wolfmen, but they traded me to the Eagle clan in return for a chief of theirs the Eagles had captured. The Eagles carried me nearly a hundred miles westward to burn me in their chief village, but I killed their war-chief and three or four others one night, and broke away.____'I couldn't turn back. They were behind me, and kept herding me westward. A few days ago I shook them off, and by Crom, the place where I took refuge turned out to be the treasure trove of old Tranicos! I found it all: chests of garments and weapons - that's where I got these clothes and this blade - heaps of coins and gems and gold ornaments, and in the midst of all, the jewels of Tothmekri gleaming like frozen starlight! And old Tranicos and his eleven captains sitting about an ebon table and staring at the board, as they've stared for a hundred years!'____'What?'____'Aye!' he laughed. 'Tranicos died in the midst of his treasure, and all with him! Their bodies have not rotted nor shriveled. They sit there in their high boots and skirted coats and lacquered hats, with their wineglasses in their stiff hands, just as they have sat for a century!'____'That's an unchancy thing!' muttered Strom uneasily, but Zarono snarled: 'What boots it? It's the treasure we want. Go on, Conan.'____Conan seated himself at the board, filled a goblet and quaffed it before he answered.____'The first wine I've drunk since I left Conawaga, by Crom! Those cursed Eagles hunted me so closely through the forest I had hardly time to munch the nuts and roots I found. Sometimes I caught frogs and ate them raw because I dared not light a fire.'____His impatient hearers informed him profanely that they were not interested in his adventures prior to finding the treasure.____He grinned hardly and resumed: 'Well, after I stumbled onto the trove I lay up and rested a few days, and made snares to catch rabbits, and let my wounds heal. I saw smoke against the western sky, but thought it some Pictish village on the beach. I lay close, but as it happens, the loot's hidden in a place the Picts shun. If any spied on me, they didn't show themselves.____'Last night I started westward, intending to strike the beach some miles north of the spot where I'd seen the smoke. I wasn't far from the shore when that storm hit. I took shelter under the lee of a rock and waited until it had blown itself out. Then I climbed a tree to look for Picts, and from it I saw your carack at anchor, Strom, and your men coming in to shore. I was making my way toward your camp on the beach when I met Galacus. I shoved a sword through him because there was an old feud between us. I wouldn't have known he had a map, if he hadn't tried to eat it before he died.____'I recognized it for what it was, of course, and was considering what use I could make of it, when the rest of you dogs came up and found the body. I was lying in a thicket not a dozen yards from you while you were arguing with your men over the matter. I judged the time wasn't ripe for me to show myself then!'____He laughed at the rage and chagrin displayed in Strom's face.____'Well, while I lay there, listening to your talk, I got a drift of the situation, and learned, from the things you let fall, that Zarono and Valenso were a few miles south of the beach. So when I heard you say that Zarono must have done the killing and taken the map, and that you meant to go and parley with him, seeking an opportunity to murder him and get it back?'____'Dog!' snarled Zarono. Strom was livid, but he laughed mirthlessly.____'Do you think I'd play fairly with a treacherous dog like you? - Go on, Conan.'____The Cimmerian grinned. It was evident that he was deliberately fanning the fires of hate between the two men.____'Nothing much, then. I came straight through the woods while you tacked along the coast, and raised the fort before you did. Your guess that the

storm had destroyed Zarono's ship was a good one - but then, you knew the configuration of this bay. ___ 'Well, there's the story. I have the treasure, Strom has a ship. Valenso has supplies. By Crom, Zarono, I don't see where you fit into the scheme, but to avoid strife I'll include you. My proposal is simple enough. ___ 'We'll split the treasure four ways. Strom and I will sail away with our shares aboard the Red Hand. You and Valenso take yours and remain lords of the wilderness, or build a ship out of tree trunks, as you wish.' ___ Valenso blanched and Zarono swore, while Strom grinned quietly. ___ 'Are you fool enough to go aboard the Red Hand alone with Strom?' snarled Zarono. 'He'll cut your throat before you're out of sight of land!' ___ Conan laughed with genuine enjoyment. 'This is like the problem of the sheep, the wolf and the cabbage,' he admitted. 'How to get them across the river without their devouring each other!' ___ 'And that appeals to your Cimmerian sense of humor,' complained Zarono. ___ 'I will not stay here!' cried Valenso, a wild gleam in his dark eyes. 'Treasure or no treasure, I must go!' ___ Conan gave him a slit-eyed glance of speculation. 'Well, then,' said he, 'how about this plan: we divide the loot as I suggested. Then Strom sails away with Zarono, Valenso, and such members of the Count's household as he may select, leaving me in command of the fort and the rest of Valenso's men, and all of Zarono's. I'll build my own ship.' Zarono looked slightly sick. ___ 'I have the choice of remaining here in exile, or abandoning my crew and going alone on the Red Hand to have my throat cut?' ___ Conan's laughter rang gustily through the hall, and he smote Zarono jovially on the back, ignoring the black murder in the buccaneer's glare. ___ 'That's it, Zarono!' quoth he. 'Stay here while Strom and I sail away, or sail away with Strom, leaving your men with me.' ___ 'I'd rather have Zarono,' said Strom frankly. 'You'd turn my own men against me, Conan, and cut my throat before I raised the Barachans.' ___ Sweat dripped from Zarono's livid face. 'Neither I, the Count, nor his niece will ever reach the land alive if we ship with that devil,' said he. 'You are both in my power in this hall. My men surround it. What's to prevent me cutting you both down?' ___ 'Not a thing,' Conan admitted cheerfully. 'Except the fact that if you do Strom's men will sail away and leave you stranded on this coast where the Picts will presently cut all your throats; and the fact that with me dead you'll never find the treasure; and the fact that I'll split your skull down to your chin if you try to summon your men.' ___ Conan laughed as he spoke, as if at some whimsical situation, but even Belesa sensed that he meant what he said. His naked cutlass lay across his knees, and Zarono's sword was under the table, out of the buccaneer's reach. Galbro was not a fighting man, and Valenso seemed incapable of decision or action. ___ 'Aye!' said Strom with an oath. 'You'd find the two of us no easy prey. I'm agreeable to Conan's proposal. What do you say, ___ 'I must leave this coast!' whispered Valenso, staring blankly. 'I must hasten - I must go - go far - quickly!' ___ Strom frowned, puzzled at the Count's stranger manner and turned to Zarono, grinning wickedly: 'And you Zarono?' ___ 'What can I say?' snarled Zarono. 'Let me take my three officers and forty men aboard the Red Hand, and the bargain's made.' ___ The officers and thirty men! ___ There was no shaking of hands, or ceremonial drinking of wine to seal the pact. The two captains glared at each other like hungry wolves. The Count plucked his mustache with a trembling hand, rapt in his own somber thoughts. Conan stretched like a great cat, drank wine, and grinned on the assemblage, but it was the sinister grin of a stalking tiger. Belesa sensed the murderous purposes that reigned there, the treacherous intent that dominated each man's mind. Not one

had any intention of keeping his part of the pact, Valenso possibly excluded. Each of the freebooters intended to possess both the ship and the entire treasure. Neither would be satisfied with less. But how? What was going on in each crafty mind? Belesa felt oppressed and stifled by the atmosphere of hatred and treachery. The Cimmerian, for all his ferocious frankness, was no less subtle than the others - and even fiercer. His domination of the situation was not physical alone, though his gigantic shoulders and massive limbs seemed too big even for the great hall. There was an iron vitality about the man that overshadowed even the hard vigor of the other freebooters. ___'Lead us to the treasure!' Zarono demanded. ___'Wait a bit,' answered Conan. 'We must keep our power evenly balanced, so one can't take advantage of the others. We'll work it this way: Strom's men will come ashore, all but half a dozen or so, and camp on the beach. Zarono's men will come out of the fort, and likewise camp on the strand, within easy sight of them. Then each crew can keep a check on the other, to see that nobody slips after us who go after the treasure, to ambush any of us. Those left aboard the Red Hand will take her out into the bay out of reach of either party. Valenso's men will stay in the fort, but will leave the gate open. Will you come with us, Count?' ___'Go into that forest?' Valenso shuddered, and drew his cloak about his shoulders. 'Not for all the gold of Tranicos!' ___'All right. It'll take about thirty men to carry the loot. We'll take fifteen from each crew and start as soon as possible.' ___Belesa, keenly alert to every angle of the drama being played out beneath her, saw Zarono and Strom shoot furtive glances at one another, then lower their gaze quickly as they lifted their glasses to hide the murky intent in their eyes. Belesa saw the fatal weakness in Conan's plan, and wondered how he could have overlooked it. Perhaps he was too arrogantly confident in his personal prowess. But she knew that he would never come out of that forest alive. Once the treasure was in their grasp, the others would form a rogues' alliance long enough to rid themselves of the man both hated. She shuddered, staring morbidly at the man she knew was doomed; strange to see that powerful fighting man sitting there, laughing and swilling wine, in full prime and power, and to know that he was already doomed to a bloody death. ___The whole situation was pregnant with dark and bloody portents. Zarono would trick and kill Strom if he could, and she knew that Strom had already marked Zarono for death, and doubtless, also, her uncle and herself. If Zarono won the final battle of cruel wits, their lives were safe - but looking at the buccaneer as he sat there chewing his mustache, with all the stark evil of his nature showing naked in his dark face, she could not decide which was more abhorrent - death or Zarono. 'How far is it?' demanded Strom. ___'If we start within the hour we can be back before midnight,' answered Conan. He emptied his glass, rose, adjusted his girdle, and glanced at the Count. ___'Valenso,' he said, 'are you mad, to kill a Pict in his hunting paint?' ___Valenso started. ___'What do you mean?' ___'Do you mean to say you don't know that your men killed a Pict hunter in the woods last night?' ___The Count shook his head. ___'None of my men was in the woods last night.' ___'Well, somebody was,' grunted the Cimmerian, fumbling in a pocket. 'I saw his head nailed to a tree near the edge of the forest. He wasn't painted for war. I didn't find any boot-tracks, from which I judged that it had been nailed up there before the storm. But there were plenty of other signs - moccasin tracks on the wet ground. Picts have been there and seen that head. They were men of some other clan, or they'd have taken it down. If they happen to be at peace with the clan the dead man belonged to, they'll make tracks to his

village to tell his tribe.'___'Perhaps they killed him,' suggested Valenso.___'No, they didn't. But they know who did, for the same reason that I know. This chain was knotted about the stump of the severed neck. You must have been utterly mad, to identify your handiwork like that.'___He drew forth something and tossed it on the table before the Count, who lurched up, choking, as his hand flew to his throat. It was the gold seal-chain he habitually wore about his neck.___'I recognized the Korzetta seal,' said Conan. 'The presence of that chain would tell any Pict it was the work of a foreigner.'___Valenso did not reply. He sat staring at the chain as if at a venomous serpent.___Conan scowled at him, and glanced questioningly at the others. Zarono made a quick gesture to indicate the Count was not quite right in the head.___Conan sheathed his cutlass and donned his lacquered hat.___'All right; let's go.'___The captains gulped down their wine and rose, hitching at their sword-hilts. Zarono laid a hand on Valenso's arm and shook him slightly. The Count started and stared about him, then followed the others out, like a man in a daze, the chain dangling from his fingers. But not all left the hall.___Belesa and Tina, forgotten on the stair, peeping between the balusters, saw Galbro fall behind the others, loitering until the heavy door closed after them. Then he hurried to the fireplace and raked carefully at the smoldering coals. He sank to his knees and peered closely at something for a long space. Then he straightened, and with a furtive air stole out of the hall by another door.___'What did Galbro find in the fire?' whispered Tina. Belesa shook her head, then, obeying the promptings of her curiosity, rose and went down to the empty hall. An instant later she was kneeling where the seneschal had knelt, and she saw what he had seen.___It was the charred remnant of the map Conan had thrown into the fire. It was ready to crumble at a touch, but faint lines and bits of writing were still discernible upon it. She could not read the writing, but she could trace the outlines of what seemed to be the picture of a hill or crag, surrounded by marks evidently representing dense trees. She could make nothing of it, but from Galbro's actions, she believed he recognized it as portraying some scene or topographical feature familiar to him. She knew the seneschal had penetrated inland further than any other man of the settlement._____6 The Plunder of the Dead_____Belesa came down the stair and paused at the sight of Count Valenso seated at the table, turning the broken chain about in his hands. She looked at him without love, and with more than a little fear. The change that had come over him was appalling; he seemed to be locked up in a grim world all of his own, with a fear that flogged all human characteristics out of him.___The fortress stood strangely quiet in the noonday heat that had followed the storm of the dawn. Voices of people within the stockade sounded subdued, muffled. The same drowsy stillness reigned on the beach outside where the rival crews lay in armed suspicion, separated by a few hundred yards of bare sand. Far out in the bay the Red Hand lay at anchor with a handful of men aboard her, ready to snatch her out of reach at the slightest indication of treachery. The carack was Strom's trump card, his best guarantee against the trickery of his associates.___Conan had plotted shrewdly to eliminate the chances of an ambush in the forest by either party. But as far as Belesa could see, he had failed utterly to safeguard himself against the treachery of his companions. He had disappeared into the woods, leading the two captains and their thirty men, and the Zingaran girl was positive that she would never see him alive again.___Presently she spoke, and her voice was strained and harsh to her own ear.___'The barbarian has led the captains into the forest. When they have the gold

in their hands, they'll kill him. But when they return with the treasure, what then? Are we to go aboard the ship? Can we trust Strom?'___Valenso shook his head absently.___'Strom would murder us all for our shares of the loot. But Zaronno whispered his intentions to me secretly. We will not go aboard the Red Hand save as her masters. Zaronno will see that night overtakes the treasure-party, so they are forced to camp in the forest. He will find a way to kill Strom and his men in their sleep. Then the buccaneers will come on stealthily to the beach. Just before dawn I will send some of my fishermen secretly from the fort to swim out to the ship and seize her. Strom never thought of that, neither did Conan. Zaronno and his men will come out of the forest and with the buccaneers encamped on the beach, fall upon the pirates in the dark, while I lead my men-at-arms from the fort to complete the rout. Without their captain they will be demoralized, and outnumbered, fall easy prey to Zaronno and me. Then we will sail in Strom's ship with all the treasure.'___'And what of me?' she asked with dry lips.___'I have promised you to Zaronno,' he answered harshly. 'But for my promise he would not take us off.'___'I will never marry him,' she said helplessly.___'You will,' he responded gloomily, and without the slightest touch of sympathy. He lifted the chain so it caught the gleam of the sun, slanting through a window. 'I must have dropped it on the sand,' he muttered. 'He has been that near - on the beach?'___'You did not drop it on the strand,' said Belesa, in a voice as devoid of mercy as his own; her soul seemed turned to stone. 'You tore it from your throat, by accident, last night in this hall, when you flogged Tina. I saw it gleaming on the floor before I left the hall.'___He looked up, his face grey with a terrible fear.___She laughed bitterly, sensing the mute question in his dilated eyes.___'Yes! the black man! He was here! In this hall! He must have found the chain on the floor. The guardsmen did not see him. But he was at your door last night. I saw him, padding along the upper hallway.'___For an instant she thought he would drop dead of sheer terror. He sank back in his chair, the chain slipping from his nerveless fingers and clinking on the table.___'In the manor!' he whispered. 'I thought bolts and bars and armed guards could keep him out, fool that I was! I can no more guard against him than I can escape him! At my door! At my door!' The thought overwhelmed him with horror. 'Why did he not enter?' he shrieked, tearing at the lace upon his collar as though it strangled him. 'Why did he not end it? I have dreamed of waking in my darkened chamber to see him squatting above me and the blue hell-fire playing about his hornedhead! Why?'___The paroxysm passed, leaving him faint and trembling.___'I understand!' he panted. 'He is playing with me, as a cat with a mouse. To have slain me last night in my chamber were too easy, too merciful. So he destroyed the ship in which I might have escaped him, and he slew that wretched Pict and left my chain upon him, so that the savages might believe I had slain him - they have seen that chain upon my neck many a time.___'But why? What subtle devilry has he in mind, what devious purpose no human mind can grasp or understand?'___'Who is this black man?' asked Belesa, chill fear crawling along her spine.___'A demon loosed by my greed and lust to plague me throughout eternity!' he whispered. He spread his long thin fingers on the table before him, and stared at her with hollow, weirdly luminous eyes that seemed to see her not at all, but to look through her and far beyond to some dim doom.___'In my youth I had an enemy at court,' he said, as if speaking more to himself than to her. 'A powerful man who stood between me and my ambition. In my lust for wealth and power I sought aid from the people of the black arts - a black magician, who, at my desire, raised

up a fiend from the outer gulfs of existence and clothed it in the form of a man. It crushed and slew my enemy; I grew great and wealthy and none could stand before me. But I thought to cheat my fiend of the price a mortal must pay who calls the black folk to do his bidding.____'By his grim arts the magician tricked the soulless waif of darkness and bound him in hell where he howled in vain - I supposed for eternity. But because the sorcerer had given the fiend the form of a man, he could never break the link that bound it to the material world; never completely close the cosmic corridors by which it had gained access to this planet.____'A year ago in Kordava word came to me that the magician, now an ancient man, had been slain in his castle, with marks of demon fingers on his throat. Then I knew that the black one had escaped from the hell where the magician had bound him, and that he would seek vengeance upon me. One night I saw his demon face leering at me from the shadows in my castle hall?____'It was not his material body, but his spirit sent to plague me - his spirit which could not follow me over the windy waters. Before he could reach Kordava in the flesh, I sailed to put broad seas between me and him. He has his limitations. To follow me across the seas he must remain in his man-like body of flesh. But that flesh is not human flesh. He can be slain, I think, by fire, though the magician, having raised him up, was powerless to slay him - such are the limits set upon the powers of sorcerers.____'But the black one is too crafty to be trapped or slain. When he hides himself no man can find him. He steals like a shadow through the night, making naught of bolts and bars. He blinds the eyes of guardsmen with sleep. He can raise storms and command the serpents of the deep, and the fiends of the night. I hoped to drown my trail in the blue rolling wastes - but he has tracked me down to claim his grim forfeit.'____The weird eyes lit palely as he gazed beyond the tapestried walls to far, invisible horizons.____'I'll trick him yet,' he whispered. 'Let him delay to strike this night - dawn will find me with a ship under my heels and again I will cast an ocean between me and his vengeance.'____'Hell's fire!'____Conan stopped short, glaring upward. Behind him the seamen halted - two compact clumps of them, bows in their hands, and suspicion in their attitude. They were following an old path made by Pictish hunters which led due east, and though they had progressed only some thirty yards, the beach was no longer visible.____'What is it?' demanded Strom suspiciously. 'What are you stopping for?'____'Are you blind? Look there!'____From the thick limb of a tree that overhung the trail a head grinned down at them - a dark painted face, framed in thick black hair, in which a toucan feather drooped over the left ear.____'I took that head down and hid it in the bushes,' growled Conan, scanning the woods about them narrowly. 'What fool could have stuck it back up there? It looks as if somebody was trying his damndest to bring the Picts down on the settlement.'____Men glanced at each other darkly, a new element of suspicion added to the already seething caldron.____Conan climbed the tree, secured the head and carried it into the bushes, where he tossed it into a stream and saw it sink.____'The Picts whose tracks are about this tree weren't Toucans,' he growled, returning through the thicket. 'I've sailed these coasts enough to know something about the sea-land tribes. If I read the prints of their moccasins right, they were Cormorants. I hope they're having a war with the Toucans. If they're at peace, they'll head straight for the Toucan village, and there'll be hell to pay. I don't know how far away that village is - but as soon as they learn of this murder, they'll come through the forest like starving wolves. That's the worst insult possible to a Pict - kill a man not in war-paint and stick his head up in a tree for the vultures

to eat. Damn peculiar things going on along this coast. But that's always the way when civilized men come into the wilderness. They're all crazy as hell. Come on.'___Men loosened blades in their scabbards and shafts in their quivers as they strode deeper into the forest. Men of the sea, accustomed to the rolling expanses of grey water, they were ill at ease with the green mysterious walls of trees and vines hemming them in. The path wound and twisted until most of them quickly lost their sense of direction, and did not even know in which direction the beach lay.___Conan was uneasy for another reason. He kept scanning the trail, and finally grunted: 'Somebody's passed along here recently - not more than an hour ahead of us. Somebody in boots, with no woodcraft. Was he the fool who found that Pict's head and stuck it back up in that tree? No, it couldn't have been him. I didn't find his tracks under the tree. But who was it? I didn't find any tracks there, except those of the Picts I'd seen already. And who's this fellow hurrying ahead of us? Did either of you bastards send a man ahead of us for any reason?'___Both Strom and Zarono loudly disclaimed any such act, glaring at each other with mutual disbelief. Neither man could see the signs Conan pointed out; the faint prints which he saw on the grassless, hard-beaten trail were invisible to their untrained eyes.___Conan quickened his pace and they hurried after him, fresh coals of suspicion added to the smoldering fire of distrust. Presently the path veered northward, and Conan left it, and began threading his way through the dense trees in a southeasterly direction. Strom stole an uneasy glance at Zarono. This might force a change in their plans. Within a few hundred feet from the trail both were hopelessly lost, and convinced of their inability to find their way back to the path. They were shaken by the fear that, after all, the Cimmerian had a force at his command, and was leading them into an ambush.___This suspicion grew as they advanced, and had almost reached panic proportions when they emerged from the thick woods and saw just ahead of them a gaunt crag that jutted up from the forest floor. A dim path leading out of the woods from the east ran among a cluster of boulders and wound up the crag on a ladder of stony shelves to a flat ledge near the summit. Conan halted, a bizarre figure in his piratical finery. 'That trail is the one I followed, running from the Eagle-Picts,' he said. 'It leads up to a cave behind that ledge. In that cave are the bodies of Tranicos and his captains, and the treasure he plundered from Tothmekri. But a word before we go up after it: if you kill me here, you'll never find your way back to the trail we followed from the beach. I know you seafaring men. You're helpless in the deep woods. Of course the beach lies due west, but if you have to make your way through the tangled woods, burdened with the plunder, it'll take you not hours, but days. And I don't think these woods will be very safe for white men, when the Toucans learn about their hunter.' He laughed at the ghastly, mirthless smiles with which they greeted his recognition of their intentions regarding him. And he also comprehended the thought that sprang in the mind of each: let the barbarian secure the loot for them, and lead them back to the beach-trail before they killed him.___'All of you stay here except Strom and Zarono,' said Conan. 'We three are enough to pack the treasure down from the cave.' Strom grinned mirthlessly.___'Go up there alone with you and Zarono? Do you take me for a fool? One man at least comes with me!' And he designated his boatswain, a brawny, hard-faced giant, naked to his broad leather belt, with gold hoops in his ears, and a crimson scarf knotted about his head.___'And my executioner comes with me!' growled Zarono. He beckoned to a lean sea-thief with a face like a parchment-covered skull, who carried a two-handed scimitar naked

over his bony shoulder.____Conan shrugged his shoulders. 'Very well. Follow me.'____They were close on his heels as he strode up the winding path and mounted the ledge. They crowded him close as he passed through the cleft in the wall behind it, and their breath sucked greedily between their teeth as he called their attention to the iron-bound chests on either side of the short tunnel-like cavern.____'A rich cargo there,' he said carelessly. 'Silks, laces, garments, ornaments, weapons - the loot of the southern seas. But the real treasure lies beyond that door.'____The massive door stood partly open. Conan frowned. He remembered closing that door before he left the cavern. But he said nothing of the matter to his eager companions as he drew aside to let them look through.____They looked into a wide cavern, lit by a strange blue glow that glimmered through a smoky mist-like haze. A great ebon table stood in the midst of the cavern, and in a carved chair with a high back and broad arms, that might once have stood in the castle of some Zingaran baron, sat a giant figure, fabulous and fantastic - there sat Bloody Tranicos, his great head sunk on his bosom, one brawny hand still gripping a jeweled goblet in which wine still sparkled; Tranicos, in his lacquered hat, his gilt-embroidered coat with jeweled buttons that winked in the blue flame, his flaring boots and gold-worked baldric that upheld a jewel-hiked sword in a golden sheath.____And ranging the board, each with his chin resting on his lace-bedecked crest, sat the eleven captains. The blue fire played weirdly on them and on their giant admiral, as it flowed from the enormous jewel on the tiny ivory pedestal, striking glints of frozen fire from the heaps of fantastically cut gems which shone before the place of Tranicos - the plunder of Khemi, the jewels of Tothmekri! The stones whose value was greater than the value of all the rest of the known jewels in the world put together!____The faces of Zaron and Strom showed pallid in the blue glow; over their shoulders their men gaped stupidly.____'Go in and take them,' invited Conan, drawing aside, and Zaron and Strom crowded avidly past him, jostling one another in their haste. Their followers were treading on their heels. Zaron kicked the door wide open - and halted with one foot on the threshold at the sight of a figure on the floor, previously hidden from view by the partly-closed door. It was a man, prone and contorted, head drawn back between his shoulders, white face twisted in a grin of mortal agony, gripping his own throat with clawed fingers.____'Galbro!' ejaculated Zaron. 'Dead! What?' With sudden suspicion he thrust his head over the threshold, into the bluish mist that filled the inner cavern. And he screamed, chokingly: 'There is death in the smoke!'____Even as he screamed, Conan hurled his weight against the four men bunched in the doorway, sending them staggering - but not headlong into the mist-filled cavern as he had planned. They were recoiling at the sight of the dead man and the realization of the trap, and his violent push, while it threw them off their feet, yet failed of the result he desired. Strom and Zaron sprawled half over the threshold on their knees, the boatswain tumbling over their legs, and the executioner caromed against the wall. Before Conan could follow up his ruthless intention of kicking the fallen men into the cavern and holding the door against them until the poisonous mist did its deadly work, he had to turn and defend himself against the frothing onslaught of the executioner who was the first to regain his balance and his wits.____The buccaneer missed a tremendous swipe with his headsman's sword as the Cimmerian ducked, and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant his skull-faced head rolled on the cavern-floor under the bite of Conan's cutlass.____In the split seconds this swift action consumed, the boatswain regained

his feet and fell on the Cimmerian raining blows with a cutlass that would have overwhelmed a lesser man. Cutlass met cutlass with a ring of steel that was deafening in the narrow cavern. The two captains rolled back across the threshold, gagging and gasping, purple in the face and too near strangled to shout, and Conan redoubled his efforts, in an endeavor to dispose of his antagonist and cut down his rivals before they could recover from the effects of the poison. The boatswain dripped blood at each step, as he was driven back before the ferocious onslaught, and he began desperately to bellow for his companions. But before Conan could deal the finishing stroke the two chiefs, gasping but murderous, came at him with swords in their hands, croaking for their men.____The Cimmerian bounded back and leaped out onto the ledge. He felt himself a match for all three men, though each was a famed swordsman, but he did not wish to be trapped by the crews which would come charging up the path at the sound of the battle.____These were not coming with as much celerity as he expected, however. They were bewildered at the sounds and muffled shouts issuing from the cavern above them but no man dared start up the path for fear of a sword in the back. Each band faced the other tensely, grasping their weapons but incapable of decision, and when they saw the Cimmerian bound out on the ledge, they still hesitated. While they stood with their arrows nocked he ran up the ladder of handholds niched in the rock near the cleft, and threw himself prone on the summit of the crag, out of their sight.____The captains stormed out on the ledge, raving and brandishing their swords, and their men, seeing their leaders were not at sword-strokes, ceased menacing each other, and gaped bewilderedly.____'Dog!' screamed Zarono. 'You planned to poison us! Traitor!'____Conan mocked them from above.____'Well, what did you expect? You two were planning to cut my throat as soon as I got the plunder for you. If it hadn't been for that fool Galbro I'd have trapped the four of you, and explained to your men how you rushed in heedless to your doom.'____'And with us both dead, you'd have taken my ship, and all the loot too!' frothed Strom.____'Aye! And the pick of each crew! I've been wanting to get back on the Main for months, and this was a good opportunity!____'It was Galbro's foot-prints I saw on the trail. I wonder how the fool learned of this cave, or how he expected to lug away the loot by himself.'____'But for the sight of his body we'd have walked into that death-trap,' muttered Zarono, his swarthy face still ashy. 'That blue smoke was like unseen fingers crushing my throat.'____'Well, what are you going to do?' their unseen tormentor yelled sardonically.____'What are we to do?' Zarono asked Strom. 'The treasure-cavern is filled with that poisonous mist, though for some reason it does not flow across the threshold.'____'You can't get the treasure,' Conan assured them with satisfaction from his aerie. 'That smoke will strangle you. It nearly got me, when I stepped in there. Listen, and I'll tell you a tale the Picts tell in their huts when the fires burn low! Once, long ago, twelve strange men came out of the sea, and found a cave and heaped it with gold and and jewels; but a Pictish shaman made magic and the earth shook, and smoke came out of the earth and strangled them where they sat at wine. The smoke, which was the smoke of hell's fire, was confined within the cavern by the magic of the wizard. The tale was told from tribe to tribe, and all the clans shun the accursed spot.____'When I crawled in there to escape the Eagle-Picts, I realized that the old legend was true, and referred to old Tranicos and his men. An earthquake cracked the rock floor of the cavern while he and his captains sat at wine, and let the mist out of the depths of the earth - doubtless out of hell, as the Picts say. Death guards old Tranicos'

treasure!'___'Bring up the men!' frothed Strom. 'We'll climb up and hew him down!'___'Don't be a fool,' snarled Zarono. 'Do you think any man on earth could climb those hand-holds in the teeth of his sword? We'll have the men up here, right enough, to feather him with shafts if he dares show himself. But we'll get those gems yet. He had some plan of obtaining the loot, or he wouldn't have brought thirty men to bear it back. If he could get it, so can we. We'll bend a cutlass-blade to make a hook, tie it to a rope and cast it about the leg of that table, then drag it to the door.'___'Well thought, Zarono!' came down Conan's mocking voice. 'Exactly what I had in mind. But how will you find your way back to the beach-path? It'll be dark long before you reach the beach, if you have to feel your way through the woods, and I'll follow you and kill you one by one in the dark.'___'It's no empty boast,' muttered Strom. 'He can move and strike in the dark as subtly and silently as a ghost. If he hunts us back through the forest, few of us will live to see the beach.'___'Then we'll kill him here,' gritted Zarono. 'Some of us will shoot at him while the rest climb the crag. If he is not struck by arrows, some of us will reach him with our swords. Listen! Why does he laugh?'___'To hear dead men making plots,' came Conan's grimly amused voice. ___'Heed him not,' scowled Zarono, and lifting his voice, shouted for the men below to join him and Strom on the ledge. ___The sailors started up the slanting trail, and one started to shout a question. Simultaneously there sounded a hum like that of an angry bee, ending in a sharp thud. The buccaneer gasped and blood gushed from his open mouth. He sank to his knees, clutching the black shaft that quivered in his breast. A yell of alarm went up from his companions. ___'What's the matter?' shouted Strom. ___'Picts!' bawled a pirate, lifting his bow and loosing blindly. At his side a man moaned and went down with an arrow through his throat. ___'Take cover, you fools!' shrieked Zarono. From his vantage-point he glimpsed painted figures moving in the bushes. One of the men on the winding path fell back dying. The rest scrambled hastily down among the rocks about the foot of the crag. They took cover clumsily, not used to this kind of fighting. Arrows flickered from bushes, splintering on the boulders. The men on the ledge lay prone at full length. ___'We're trapped!' Strom's face was pale. Bold enough with a deck under his feet, this silent, savage warfare shook his ruthless nerves. ___'Conan said they feared this crag,' said Zarono. 'When night falls the men must climb up here. We'll hold the crag. The Picts won't rush us.' ___'Aye!' mocked Conan above them. 'They won't climb the crag to get at you, that's true. They'll merely surround it and keep you here until you all die of thirst and starvation.' ___'He speaks truth,' said Zarono helplessly. 'What shall we do?' ___'Make a truce with him,' muttered Strom. 'If any man can get us out of this jam, he can. Time enough to cut his throat later.' Lifting his voice he called: 'Conan, let's forget our feud for the time being. You're in this fix as much as we are. Come down and help us out of it.' ___'How do you figure that?' retorted the Cimmerian. 'I have but to wait until dark, climb down the other side of this crag and melt into the forest. I can crawl through the line the Picts have thrown around this hill, and return to the fort to report you all slain by the savages - which will shortly be truth!' Zarono and Strom stared at each other in pallid silence. 'But I'm not going to do that!' Conan roared. 'Not because I have any love for you dogs, but because a white man doesn't leave white men, even his enemies, to be butchered by Picts.' ___The Cimmerian's tousled black head appeared over the crest of the crag. ___'Now listen closely: that's only a small band down there. I saw them sneaking through the brush when I laughed, a while ago.

Anyway, if there had been many of them, every man at the foot of the crag would be dead already. I think that's a band of fleet-footed young men sent ahead of the main war-party to cut us off from the beach. I'm certain a big war-band is heading in our direction from somewhere.____'They've thrown a cordon around the west side of the crag, but I don't think there are any on the east side. I'm going down on that side and get in the forest and work around behind them. Meanwhile, you crawl down the path and join your men among the rocks. Tell them to sling their bows and draw their swords. When you hear me yell, rush the trees on the west side of the clearing.'____'What of the treasure?'____'To hell with the treasure! We'll be lucky if we get out of here with our heads on our shoulders.'____The black-maned head vanished. They listened for sounds to indicate that Conan had crawled to the almost sheer eastern wall and was working his way down, but they heard nothing. Nor was there any sound in the forest. No more arrows broke against the rocks where the sailors were hidden. But all knew that fierce black eyes were watching with murderous patience.____Gingerly Strom, Zarono and the boatswain started down the winding path. They were halfway down when the black shafts began to whisper around them. The boatswain groaned and toppled limply down the slope, shot through the heart. Arrows shivered on the helmets and breastplates of the chiefs as they tumbled in frantic haste down the steep trail. They reached the foot in a scrambling rush and lay panting among the boulders, swearing breathlessly.____'Is this more of Conan's trickery?' wondered Zarono profanely.____'We can trust him in this matter,' asserted Strom. 'These barbarians live by their own particular code of honor, and Conan would never desert men of his own complexion to be slaughtered by people of another race. He'll help us against the Picts, even though he plans to murder us himself - hark?____A blood-freezing yell knifed the silence. It came from the woods to the west, and simultaneously an object arched out of the trees, struck the ground and rolled bouncingly towards the rocks - a severed human head, the hideously painted face frozen in a snarl of death.____'Conan's signal!' roared Strom, and the desperate freebooters rose like a wave from the rocks and rushed headlong toward the woods.____Arrows whirred out of the bushes, but their flight was hurried and erratic, only three men fell. Then the wild men of the sea plunged through the fringe of foliage and fell on the naked painted figures that rose out of the gloom before them. There was a murderous instant of panting, ferocious effort, hand-to-hand, cutlasses beating down war-axes, booted feet trampling naked bodies, and then bare feet were rattling through the bushes in headlong flight as the survivors of that brief carnage quit the fray, leaving seven still, painted figures stretched on the blood-stained leaves that littered the earth. Further back in the thickets sounded a thrashing and heaving, and then it ceased and Conan strode into view, his lacquered hat gone, his coat torn, his cutlass dripping in his hand.____'What now?' panted Zarono. He knew the charge had succeeded only because Conan's unexpected attack on the rear of the Picts had demoralized the painted men, and prevented them from falling back before the rush. But he exploded into curses as Conan passed his cutlass through a buccaneer who writhed on the ground with a shattered hip.____'We can't carry him with us,' grunted Conan. 'It wouldn't be any kindness to leave him to be taken alive by the Picts. Come on!'____They crowded close at his heels as he trotted through the trees. Alone they would have sweated and blundered among the thickets for hours before they found the beach-trail - if they had ever found it. The Cimmerian led them as unerringly as if he had been following a blazed path, and

the rovers shouted with hysterical relief as they burst suddenly upon the trail that ran westward. ___'Fool!' Conan clapped a hand on the shoulder of a pirate who started to break into a run, and hurled him back among his companions. 'You'll burst your heart and fall within a thousand yards. We're miles from the beach. Take an easy gait. We may have to sprint the last mile. Save some of your wind for it. Come on, now.' ___He set off down the trail at a steady jog-trot; the seamen followed him, suiting their pace to his. ___The sun was touching the waves of the western ocean. Tina stood at the window from which Belesa had watched the storm. ___'The setting sun turns the ocean to blood,' she said. 'The carack's sail is a white fleck on the crimson waters. The woods are already darkened with clustering shadows.' ___'What of the seamen on the beach?' asked Belesa languidly. She reclined on a couch, her eyes closed, her hands clasped behind her head. ___'Both camps are preparing their supper,' said Tina. 'They gather driftwood and build fires. I can hear them shouting to one another - what is that?' ___The sudden tenseness in the girl's tone brought Belesa upright on the couch. Tina grasped the window-sill, her face white. ___'Listen! A howling, far off, like many wolves!' ___'Wolves?' Belesa sprang up, fear clutching her heart. 'Wolves do not hunt in packs at this time of the year?' ___'Oh, look!' shrilled the girl, pointing. 'Men are running out Of the forest!' ___In an instant Belesa was beside her, staring wide-eyed at the figures, small in the distance, streaming out of the woods. ___'The sailors!' she gasped. 'Empty-handed! I see Zarono - Strom?' ___'Where is Conan?' whispered the girl. ___Belesa shook her head. ___'Listen! Oh, listen!' whimpered the child, clinging to her. 'The Picts!' ___All in the fort could hear it now - a vast ululation of mad exultation and blood-lust, from the depths of the dark forest. ___That sound spurred on the panting men reeling toward the palisade. ___'Hasten!' gasped Strom, his face a drawn mask of exhausted effort. 'They are almost at our heels. My ship? ___'She is too far out for us to reach,' panted Zarono. 'Make for the stockade. See, the men camped on the beach have seen us!' He waved his arms in breathless pantomime, but the men on the strand understood, and they recognized the significance of that wild howling, rising to a triumphant crescendo. The sailors abandoned their fires and cooking-pots and fled for the stockade gate. They were pouring through it as the fugitives from the forest rounded the south angle and reeled into the gate, a heaving, frantic mob, half-dead from exhaustion. The gate was slammed with frenzied haste, and sailors began to climb the firing-ledge, to join the men-at-arms already there. ___Belesa confronted Zarono. ___'Where is Conan?' ___The buccaneer jerked a thumb toward the blackening woods; his chest heaved; sweat poured down his face. 'Their scouts were at our heels before we gained the beach. He paused to slay a few and give us time to get away.' ___He staggered away to take his place on the firing-ledge, whither Strom had already mounted. Valenso stood there, a somber, cloak-wrapped figure, strangely silent and aloof. He was like a man bewitched. ___'Look!' yelled a pirate, above the deafening howling of the yet unseen horde. ___A man emerged from the forest and raced fleetly across the open belt. ___'Conan!' ___Zarono grinned wolfishly. ___'We're safe in the stockade; we know where the treasure is. No reason why we shouldn't feather him with arrows now.' ___'Nay!' Strom caught his arm. 'We'll need his sword! Look!' ___Behind the fleet-footed Cimmerian a wild horde burst from the forest, howling as they ran - naked Picts, hundreds and hundreds of them. Their arrows rained about the Cimmerian. A few strides more and Conan reached the eastern wall of the stockade, bounded high, seized

the points of the logs and heaved himself up and over, his cutlass in his teeth. Arrows thudded venomously into the logs where his body had just been. His resplendent coat was gone, his white silk shirt torn and bloodstained. ___'Stop them!' he roared as his feet hit the ground inside. 'If they get on the wall, we're done for!' ___Pirates, buccaneers and men-at-arms responded instantly, and a storm of arrows and quarrels tore into the oncoming horde. ___Conan saw Belesa, with Tina clinging to her hand, and his language was picturesque. ___'Get into the manor,' he commanded in conclusion. 'Their shafts will arch over the wall - what did I tell you?' As a black shaft cut into the earth at Belesa's feet and quivered like a serpent-head, Conan caught up a longbow and leaped to the firing-ledge. 'Some of you fellows prepare torches!' he roared, above the rising clamor of the battle. 'We can't fight them in the dark!' ___The sun had sunk in a welter of blood; out in the bay the men aboard the carack had cut the anchor chain and the Red Hand was rapidly receding on the crimson horizon. _____7

Men of the Woods _____Night had fallen, but torches streamed across the strand, casting the mad scene into lurid revelation. Naked men in paint swarmed the beach; like waves they came against the palisade, bared teeth and blazing eyes gleaming in the glare of the torches thrust over the wall. Toucan feathers waved in black manes, and the feathers of the cormorant and the sea-falcon. A few warriors, the wildest and most barbaric of them all, wore shark's teeth woven in their tangled locks. The sea-land tribes had gathered from up and down the coast in all directions to rid their country of the white-skinned invaders. ___They surged against the palisade, driving a storm of arrows before them, fighting into the teeth of the shafts and bolts that tore into their masses from the stockade. Sometimes they came so close to the wall they were hewing at the gate with their war-axes and thrusting their spears through the loop-holes. But each time the tide ebbed back without flowing over the palisade, leaving its drift of dead. At this kind of fighting the freebooters of the sea were at their stoutest; their arrows and bolts tore holes in the charging horde, their cutlasses hewed the wild men from the palisades they strove to scale. ___Yet again and again the men of the woods returned to the onslaught with all the stubborn ferocity that had been roused in their fierce hearts. ___'They are like mad dogs!' gasped Zarono, hacking downward at the dark hands that grasped at the palisade points, the dark faces that snarled up at him. ___'If we can hold the fort until dawn they'll lose heart,' grunted Conan, splitting a feathered skull with professional precision. 'They won't maintain a long siege. Look, they're falling back.' ___The charge rolled back and the men on the wall shook the sweat out of their eyes, counted their dead and took a fresh grasp on the blood-slippery hilts of their swords. Like blood-hungry wolves, grudgingly driven from a cornered prey, the Picts skulked back beyond the ring of torches. Only the bodies of the slain lay before the palisade. ___'Have they gone?' Strom shook back his wet, tawny locks. The cutlass in his fist was notched and red, his brawny bare arm was splashed with blood. ___'They're still out there,' Conan nodded toward the outer darkness which ringed the circle of torches, made more intense by their light. He glimpsed movements in the shadows; glitter of eyes and the dull sheen of steel. ___'They've drawn off for a bit, though,' he said. 'Put sentries on the wall, and let the rest drink and eat. It's past midnight. We've been fighting for hours without much interval.' ___The chiefs clambered down from the ledges, calling their men from the walls. A sentry was posted in the middle of each wall, east, west, north and south, and a clump of men-at-arms were left at the gate. The

Picts, to reach the wall, would have to charge across a wide, torchlit space, and the defenders could resume their places long before the attackers could reach the palisade. ___ 'Where's Valenso?' demanded Conan, gnawing a huge beef-bone as he stood beside the fire the men had built in the center of the compound. Pirates, buccaneers and henchmen mingled with each other, wolfing the meat and ale the women brought them, and allowing their wounds to be bandaged. ___ 'He disappeared an hour ago,' grunted Strom. 'He was fighting on the wall beside me, when suddenly he stopped short and glared out into the darkness as if he saw a ghost. "Look!" he croaked. "The black devil! I see him! Out there in the night!" Well, I could swear I saw a figure moving among the shadows that was too tall for a Pict. But it was just a glimpse and it was gone. But Valenso jumped down from the firing-ledge and staggered into the manor like a man with a mortal wound. I haven't seen him since.' ___ 'He probably saw a forest-devil,' said Conan tranquilly. 'The Picts say this coast is lousy with them. What I'm more afraid of is fire-arrows. The Picts are likely to start shooting them at any time. What's that? It sounded like a cry for help?' ___ When the lull came in the fighting, Belesa and Tina had crept to their window, from which they had been driven by the danger of flying arrows. Silently they watched the men gather about the fire. ___ 'There are not enough men on the stockade,' said Tina. ___ In spite of her nausea at the sight of the corpses sprawled about the palisade, Belesa was forced to laugh. ___ 'Do you think you know more about wars and sieges than the freebooters?' she chided gently. ___ 'There should be more men on the walls,' insisted the child, shivering. 'Suppose the black man came back?' ___ Belesa shuddered at the thought. ___ 'I am afraid,' murmured Tina. 'I hope Strom and Zarono are killed.' ___ 'And not Conan?' asked Belesa curiously. ___ 'Conan would not harm us,' said the child, confidently. 'He lives up to his barbaric code of honor, but they are men who have lost all honor.' ___ 'You are wise beyond your years, Tina,' said Belesa, with the vague uneasiness the precocity of the girl frequently roused in her. ___ 'Look!' Tina stiffened. 'The sentry is gone from the south wall! I saw him on the ledge a moment ago; now he has vanished.' ___ From their window the palisade points of the south wall were just visible over the slanting roofs of a row of huts which paralleled that wall almost its entire length. A sort of open-topped corridor, three or four yards wide, was framed by the stockade and the back of the huts, which were built in a solid row. These huts were occupied by the serfs. ___ 'Where could the sentry have gone?' whispered Tina uneasily. ___ Belesa was watching one end of the hut-row which was not far from a side door of the manor. She could have sworn she saw a shadowy figure glide from behind the huts and disappear at the door. Was that the vanished sentry? Why had he left the wall, and why should he steal so subtly into the manor? She did not believe it was the sentry she had seen, and a nameless fear congealed her blood. ___ 'Where is the Count, Tina?' she asked. ___ 'In the great hall, my Lady. He sits alone at the table, wrapped in his cloak and drinking wine, with a face gray as death.' ___ 'Go and tell him what we have seen. I will keep watch from this window, lest the Picts steal to the unguarded wall.' ___ Tina scampered away. Belesa heard her slippered feet pattering along the corridor, receding down the stair. Then abruptly, terribly, there rang out a scream of such poignant fear that Belesa's heart almost stopped with the shock of it. She was out of the chamber and flying down the corridor before she was aware that her limbs were in motion. She ran down the stair -and halted as if turned to stone. ___ She did not scream as Tina had screamed. She was incapable of sound or motion. She saw

Tina, was aware of the reality of small hands grasping her frantically. But these were the only sane realities in a scene of black nightmare and lunacy and death, dominated by the monstrous, anthropomorphic shadow which spread awful arms against a lurid, hell-fire glare. ___Out in the stockade Strom shook his head at Conan's question. ___'I heard nothing.' ___'I did!' Conan's wild instincts were roused; he was tensed, his eyes blazing. 'It came from the south wall, behind those huts!' ___Drawing his cutlass he strode toward the palisade. From the compound the wall on the south and the sentry posted there were not visible, being hidden behind the huts. Strom followed, impressed by the Cimmerian's manner. ___At the mouth of the open space between the huts and wall Conan halted, warily. The space was dimly lighted by torches flaring at either corner of the stockade. And about mid-way of that natural corridor a crumpled shape sprawled on the ground. ___'Bracus!' swore Strom, running forward and dropping on one knee beside the figure. 'By Mitra, his throat's been cut from ear to ear!' ___Conan swept the space with a quick glance, finding it empty save for himself, Strom and the dead man. He peered through a loop-hole. No living man moved within the ring of torch-light outside the fort. ___'Who could have done this?' he wondered. ___'Zarono!' Strom sprang up, spitting fury like a wildcat, his hair bristling, his face convulsed. 'He has set his thieves to stabbing my men in the back! He plans to wipe me out by treachery! Devils! I am leagued within and without!' ___'Wait!' Conan reached a restraining hand. 'I don't believe Zarono?' ___But the maddened pirate jerked away and rushed around the end of the hut-row, breathing blasphemies. Conan ran after him, swearing. Strom made straight toward the fire by which Zarono's tall lean form was visible as the buccaneer chief quaffed a jack of ale. ___His amazement was supreme when the jack was dashed violently from his hand, spattering his breastplate with foam, and he was jerked around to confront the passion-distorted face of the pirate captain. ___'You murdering dog!' roared Strom. 'Will you slay my men behind my back while they fight for your filthy hide as well as for mine?' ___Conan was hurrying toward them and on all sides men ceased eating and drinking to stare in amazement. ___'What do you mean?' sputtered Zarono. ___'You've set your men to stabbing mine at their posts!' screamed the maddened Barachan. ___'You lie!' Smoldering hate burst into sudden flame. With an incoherent howl Strom heaved up his cutlass and cut at the buccaneer's head. Zarono caught the blow on his armored left arm and sparks flew as he staggered back, ripping out his own sword. ___In an instant the captains were fighting like madmen, their blades flaming and flashing in the firelight. Their crews reacted instantly and blindly. A deep roar went up as pirates and buccaneers drew their swords and fell upon each other. The men left on the walls abandoned their posts and leaped down into the stockade, blades in hand. In an instant the compound was a battle-ground, where knotting, writhing groups of men smote and slew in a blind frenzy. Some of the men-at-arms and serfs were drawn into the melee, and the soldiers at the gate turned and stared down in amazement, forgetting the enemy which lurked outside. ___It had all happened so quickly - smoldering passions exploding into sudden battle - that men were fighting all over the compound before Conan could reach the maddened chiefs. Ignoring their swords he tore them apart with such violence that they staggered backward, and Zarono tripped and fell headlong. ___'You cursed fools, will you throw away all our lives?' ___Strom was frothing mad and Zarono was bawling for assistance. A buccaneer ran at Conan from behind and cut at his head. The Cimmerian half turned and caught his arm, checking

the stroke in mid-air.____'Look, you fools!' he roared, pointing with his sword. Something in his tone caught the attention of the battle-crazed mob; men froze in their places, with lifted swords, Zarono on one knee, and twisted their heads to stare. Conan was pointing at a soldier on the firing-ledge. The man was reeling, arms clawing the air, choking as he tried to shout. Suddenly he pitched headlong to the ground and all saw the black arrow standing up between his shoulders.____A cry of alarm rose from the compound. On the heels of the shout came a clamor of blood-freezing screams, the shattering impact of axes on the gate. Flaming arrows arched over the wall and stuck in logs, and thin wisps of blue smoke curled upward. Then from behind the huts that ranged the south wall came swift and furtive figures racing across the compound.____'The Picts are in!' roared Conan.____Bedlam followed his shout. The freebooters ceased their feud, some turned to meet the savages, some to spring to the wall. Savages were pouring from behind the huts and they streamed over the compound; their axes flashed against the cutlasses of the sailors.____Zarono was struggling to his feet when a painted savage rushed upon him from behind and brained him with a war-ax.____Conan with a clump of sailors behind him was battling with the Picts inside the stockade, and Strom, with most of his men, was climbing up on the firing-ledges, slashing at the dark figures already swarming over the wall. The Picts, who had crept up unobserved and surrounded the fort while the defenders were fighting among themselves, were attacking from all sides. Val-enso's soldiers were clustered at the gate, trying to hold it against a howling swarm of exultant demons.____More and more savages streamed from behind the huts, having scaled the undefended south wall. Strom and his pirates were beaten back from the other sides of the palisade and in an instant the compound was swarming with naked warriors. They dragged down the defenders like wolves; the battle revolved into swirling whirlpools of painted figures surging about small groups of desperate white men. Picts, sailors and henchmen littered the earth, stamped underfoot by the heedless feet. Blood-smearing braves dived howling into huts and the shrieks that rose from the interiors where women and children died beneath the red axes rose above the din of the battle. The men-at-arms abandoned the gate when they heard those pitiful cries, and in an instant the Picts had burst it and were pouring into the palisade at that point also. Huts began to go up in flames.____'Make for the manor!' roared Conan, and a dozen men surged in behind him as he hewed an inexorable way through the snarling pack.____Strom was at his side, wielding his red cutlass like a flail.____'We can't hold the manor,' grunted the pirate.____'Why not?' Conan was too busy with his crimson work to spare a glance.____'Because?uh!' A knife in a dark hand sank deep in the Barachan's back. 'Devil eat you, bastard!' Strom turned staggeringly and split the savage's head to his teeth. The pirate reeled and fell to his knees, blood starting from his lips.____'The manor's burning!' he croaked, and slumped over in the dust.____Conan cast a swift look about him. The men who had followed him were all down in their blood. The Pict gasping out his life under the Cimmerian's feet was the last of the group which had barred his way. All about him battle was swirling and surging, but for the moment he stood alone. He was not far from the south wall. A few strides and he could leap to the smoke, brandishing gleaming axes. They were still yards behind him when Conan ducked into the space between the huts and the wall. At the other end of the corridor he saw other howling shapes, running to cut him off. Halting short he tossed Belesa bodily to the fire-ledge and leaped after her. Swinging her over the palisade he dropped her into

the sand outside, and dropped Tina after her. A thrown ax crashed into a log by his shoulder, and then he too was over the wall and gathering up his dazed and helpless charges. When the Picts reached the wall the space before the palisade was empty of all except the dead._____8 A Pirate Returns to the Sea_____Dawn was tingeing the dim waters with an old rose hue. Far out across the tinted waters a fleck of white grew out of the mist - a sail that seemed to hang suspended in the pearly sky. On a bushy headland Conan the Cimmerian held a ragged cloak over a fire of green wood. As he manipulated the cloak, puffs of smoke rose upward, quivered against the dawn and vanished.____Belesa crouched near him, one arm about Tina.____'Do you think they'll see it and understand?'____'They'll see it, right enough,' he assured her. 'They've been hanging off and on diis coast all night, hoping to sight some survivors. They're scared stiff. There's only half a dozen of them, and not one can navigate well enough to sail from here to the Barachan Isles. They'll understand my signals; it's the pirate code. I'm telling them that the captains are dead and all the sailors, and for them to come inshore and take us aboard. They know I can navigate, and they'll be glad to ship under me; they'll have to. I'm the only captain left.'____'But suppose the Picts see the smoke?' She shuddered, glancing back over the misty sands and bushes to where, miles to the north, a column of smoke stood up in the still air.____'They're not likely to see it. After I hid you in the woods I crept back and saw them dragging barrels of wine and ale out of the storehouses. Already most of them were reeling. They'll all be lying around too drunk to move by this time. If I had a hundred men I could wipe out the whole horde. Look! There goes a rocket from the Red Hand! That means they're coming to take us off!'____Conan stamped out the fire, handed the cloak back to Belesa and stretched like a great lazy cat. Belesa watched him in wonder. His unperturbed manner was not assumed; the night of fire and blood and slaughter, and the flight through the black woods afterward, had left his nerves untouched. He was as calm as if he had spent the night in feast and revel. Belesa did not fear him; she felt safer than she had felt since she landed on that wild coast. He was not like the freebooters, civilized men who had repudiated all standards of honor, and lived without any. Conan, on the other hand, lived according to the code of his people, which was barbaric and bloody, but at least upheld its own peculiar standards of honor.____'Do you think he is dead?' she asked, with seeming irrelevancy.____He did not ask her to whom she referred.____'I believe so. Silver and fire are both deadly to evil spirits, and he got a belly-full of both.'____Neither spoke of that subject again; Belesa's mind shrank from the task of conjuring up the scene when a black figure skulked into the great hall and a long-delayed vengeance was horribly consummated.____'What will you do when you get back to Zingara?' Conan asked.____She shook her head helplessly. 'I do not know. I have neither money nor friends. I am not trained to earn my living. Perhaps it would have been better had one of those arrows struck my heart.'____'Do not say that, my Lady!' begged Tina. 'I will work for us both!'____Conan drew a small leather bag from inside his girdle.____'I didn't get Tothmekri's jewels,' he rumbled. 'But here are some baubles I found in the chest where I got the clothes I'm wearing.' He spilled a handful of flaming rubies into his palm. 'They're worth a fortune, themselves.' He dumped them back into the bag and handed it to her.____'But I can't take these?' she began.____'Of course you'll take them. I might as well leave you for the Picts to scalp as to take you back to Zingara to starve,' said he. 'I know what it is to be penniless in a Hyborian land. Now in

my country sometimes there are famines; but people are hungry only when there's no food in the land at all. But in civilized countries I've seen people sick of gluttony while others were starving. Aye, I've seen men fall and die of hunger against the walls of shops and storehouses crammed with food.____'Sometimes I was hungry, too, but then I took what I wanted at sword's-point. But you can't do that. So you take these rubies. You can sell them and buy a castle, and slaves and fine clothes, and with them it won't be hard to get a husband, because civilized men all desire wives with these possessions.'____'But what of you?'____Conan grinned and indicated the Red Hand drawing swiftly inshore.____'A ship and a crew are all I want. As soon as I set foot on that deck, I'll have a ship, and as soon as I can raise the Barachans I'll have a crew. The lads of the Red Brotherhood are eager to ship with me, because I always lead them to rare loot. And as soon as I've set you and the girl ashore on the Zingaran coast, I'll show the dogs some looting! Nay, nay, no thanks! What are a handful of gems to me, when all the loot of the southern seas will be mine for the grasping?'

_____WOLVES BEYOND THE
BORDER____(Draft)_____1_____It was the mutter of a drum that awakened me. I lay still amidst the bushes where I had taken refuge, straining my ears to locate it, for such sounds are illusive in the deep forest. In the dense woods about me there was no sound. Above me the tangled vines and brambles bent close to form a massed roof, and above them there loomed the higher, gloomier arch of the branches of the great trees. Not a star shone through that leafy vault. Low-hanging clouds seemed to press down upon the very tree-tops. There was no moon. The night was dark as a witch's hate.____The better for me. If I could not see my enemies, neither could they see me. But the whisper of that ominous drum stole through the night: thrum! thrum! thrum!, a steady monotone that grunted and growled of nameless secrets. I could not mistake the sound. Only one drum in the world makes just that deep, menacing, sullen thunder: a Pictish war-drum, in the hands of those wild painted savages who haunted the Wilderness beyond the border of the Westermarck.____And I was beyond that border, alone, and concealed in a brambly covert in the midst of the great forest where those naked fiends have reigned since Time's earliest dawns.____Now I located the sound; the drum was beating westward of my position and I believed at no great distance. Quickly I girt my belt more firmly, settled war-ax and knife in their beaded sheaths, strung my heavy bow and made sure that my quiver was in place at my left hip - groping with my fingers in the utter darkness - and then I crawled from the thicket and went warily toward the sound of the drum.____That it personally concerned me I did not believe. If the forest-men had discovered me, their discovery would have been announced by a sudden knife in my throat, not by a drum beating in the distance. But the throb of the war-drum had a significance no forest-runner could ignore. It was a warning and a threat, a promise of doom for those white-skinned invaders whose lonely cabins and ax-marked clearings menaced the immemorial solitude of the wilderness. It meant fire and torture, flaming arrows dropping like falling stars through the darkness, and the red ax crunching through skulls of men and women and children.____So through the blackness of the nighted forest I went, feeling my way delicately among the mighty boles, sometimes creeping on hands and knees, and now and then my heart in my throat when a creeper brushed across my face or groping hand. For there are huge serpents in that forest which sometimes hang by their tails from branches and so snare their prey. But the creatures I sought were more terrible than any serpent, and as the drum grew louder I went

as cautiously as if I trod on naked swords. And presently I glimpsed a red gleam among the trees, and heard a mutter of barbaric voices mingling with the snarl of the drum.____Whatever weird ceremony might be taking place yonder under the black trees, it was likely that they had outposts scattered about the place, and I knew how silent and motionless a Pict could stand, merging with the natural forest growth even in dim light, and unsuspected until his blade was through his victim's heart. My flesh crawled at the thought of colliding with one such grim sentry in the darkness, and I drew my knife and held it extended before me. But I knew not even a Pict could see me in that blackness of tangled forest-roof and the cloud-massed sky.____The light revealed itself as a fire before which black silhouettes moved like black devils against the red fires of hell, and presently I crouched close among the dense tamarack and looked into a black-walled glade and the figures that moved therein.____There were forty or fifty Picts, naked but for loin-cloths, and hideously painted, who squatted in a wide semi-circle, facing the fire, with their backs to me. By the hawk feathers in their thick black manes, I knew them to be of the Hawk Clan, or Onayaga. In the midst of the glade there was a crude altar made of rough stones heaped together, and at the sight of this my flesh crawled anew. For I had seen these Pictish altars before, all charred with fire and stained with blood, in empty forest glades, and though I had never witnessed the rituals wherein these things were used, I had heard the tales told about them by men who had been captives among the Picts, or spied upon them even as I was spying.____A feathered shaman was dancing between the fire and the altar, a slow, shuffling dance indescribably grotesque, which caused his plumes to swing and sway about him: his features were hidden by a grinning scarlet mask that looked like a forest-devil's face.____In the midst of the semi-circle of warriors squatted one with the great drum between his knees and as he smote it with his clenched fist it gave forth that low, growling rumble which is like the mutter of distant thunder.____Between the warriors and the dancing shaman stood one who was no Pict. For he was tall as I, and his skin was light in the play of the fire. But he was clad only in doeskin loin-clout and moccasins, and his body was painted, and there was a hawk-feather in his hair, so I knew he must be a Ligurean, one of those light-skinned savages who dwell in small clans in the great forest, generally at war with the Picts, but sometimes at peace and allied with them. Their skins are white as an Aquilonian's. The Picts are a white race too, in that they are not black nor brown nor yellow, but they are black-eyed and black-haired and dark of skin, and neither they nor the Ligureans are spoken of as 'white' by the people of Westermarck, who only designate thus a man of Hyborian blood.____Now as I watched I saw three warriors drag a man into the ring of the firelight - another Pict, naked and bloodstained, who still wore in his tangled mane a feather that identified him as a member of the Raven Clan, with whom the Hawkmen were ever at war. His captors cast him down upon the altar, bound hand and foot, and I saw his muscles swell and writhe in the firelight as he sought in vain to break the rawhide thongs which prisoned him.____Then the shaman began dancing again, weaving intricate patterns about the altar, and the man upon it, and he who beat the drum wrought himself into a fine frenzy, thundering away like one possessed of a devil. And suddenly, down from an overhanging branch dropped one of those great serpents of which I have spoken. The firelight glistened on its scales as it writhed toward the altar, its beady eyes glittered, and its forked tongue darted in and out, but the warriors showed no fear, though it passed within a few feet of some of

them. And that was strange, for ordinarily these serpents are the only living creatures a Pict fears.____The monster reared its head up on arched neck above the altar, and it and the shaman faced one another across the prone body of the prisoner. The shaman danced with a writhing of body and arms, scarcely moving his feet, and as he danced, the great serpent danced with him, weaving and swaying as though mesmerized, and from the mask of the shaman rose a weird wailing that shuddered like the wind through the dry reeds along the sea-marshes. And slowly the great reptile reared higher and higher, and began looping itself about the altar and the man upon it, until his body was hidden by its shimmering folds, and only his head was visible with that other terrible head swaying close above it.____The shrilling of the shaman rose to a crescendo of infernal triumph, and he cast something into the fire. A great green cloud of smoke billowed up and rolled about the altar, so that it almost hid the pair upon it, making their outlines indistinct and illusive. But in the midst of that cloud I saw a hideous writhing and changing - those outlines melted and flowed together horribly, and for a moment I could not tell which was the serpent and which the man. A shuddering sigh swept over the assembled Picts like a wind moaning through nighted branches.____Then the smoke cleared and man and snake lay limply on the altar, and I thought both were dead. But the shaman seized the neck and let the great reptile ooze to the ground, and he tumbled the body of the man from the stones to fall beside the monster, and cut the rawhide thongs that bound wrist and ankle.____Then he began a weaving dance about them, chanting as he danced and swaying his arms in mad gestures. And presently the man moved. But he did not rise. His head swayed from side to side, and I saw his tongue dart out and in again. And Mitra, he began to wriggle away from the fire, squirming along on his belly, as a snake crawls!____And the serpent was suddenly shaken with convulsions and arched its neck and reared up almost its full length, and then fell back, loop on loop and reared up again vainly, horribly like a man trying to rise and stand and walk upright after being deprived of his limbs.____The wild howling of the Picts shook the night, and I was sick where I crouched among the bushes, and fought an urge to retch. I understood the meaning of this ghastly ceremony now. I had heard tales of it. By black, primordial sorcery that spawned and thrived in the depths of this black primal forest, that painted shaman had transferred the soul of a captured enemy into the foul body of a serpent. It was the revenge of a fiend. And the screaming of the blood-mad Picts was like the yelling of all Hell's demons.____And the victims writhed and agonized side by side, the man and the serpent, until a sword flashed in the hand of the shaman and both heads fell together - and gods, it was the serpent's trunk which but quivered and jerked a little and then lay still, and the man's body which rolled and knotted and thrashed like a beheaded snake. A deathly faintness and weakness took hold of me, for what white man could watch such black diabolism unmoved? And these painted savages, smeared with war-paint howling and posturing and triumphing over the ghastly doom of a foe, seemed not humans at all to me, but foul fiends of the black world whom it was a duty and an obligation to slay.____The shaman sprang up and faced the ring of warriors, and, ripping off his mask, threw up his head and howled like a wolf. And as the firelight fell full on his face, I recognized him, and with that recognition all horror and revulsion gave place to red rage, and all thought of personal peril and the recollection of my mission, which was my first obligation, was swept away. For that shaman was old Teyanoga of the South Hawks, he who burnt alive my friend, Jon

Gaiter's son.____In the lust of my hate I acted almost instinctively - whipped up my bow, notched an arrow and loosed, all in an instant. The firelight was uncertain, but the range was not great, and we of the Westermarck live by twang of bow. Old Teyanoga yowled like a cat and reeled back and his warriors howled with amazement to see a shaft quivering suddenly in his breast. The tall, light-skinned warrior wheeled, and for the first time I saw his face - and Mitra, he was a white man!____The horrid shock of that surprise held me paralysed for a moment and had almost undone me. For the Picts instantly sprang up and rushed into the forest, like panthers, seeking the foe who fired that arrow. They had reached the first fringe of bushes when I jerked out of my spell of amaze and horror, and sprang up and raced away in the darkness, ducking and dodging among trees which I avoided more by instinct than otherwise, for it was dark as ever. But I knew the Picts could not strike my trail, but must hunt as blindly as I fled. And presently, as I ran northward, behind me I heard a hideous howling whose blood-mad fury was enough to freeze the blood even of a forest-runner. And I believed that they had plucked my arrow from the shaman's breast and discovered it to be a white man's shaft. That would bring them after me with fiercer blood-lust than ever.____I fled on, my heart pounding from fear and excitement, and the horror of the nightmare I had witnessed. And that a white man, a Hyborian, should have stood there as a welcome and evidently honored guest - for he was armed - I had seen knife and hatchet at his belt - was so monstrous I wondered if, after all, the whole thing were a nightmare. For never before had a white man observed The Dance of the Changing Serpent save as a prisoner, or a spy, as I had. And what monstrous thing it portended I knew not, but I was shaken with foreboding and horror at the thought.____And because of my horror I went more carelessly than is my wont, seeking haste at the expense of stealth, and occasionally blundering into a tree I could have avoided had I taken more care. And I doubt not it was the noise of this blundering progress which brought the Pict upon me, for he could not have seen me in that pitch-darkness.____Behind me sounded no more yells, but I knew that the Picts were ranging like fire-eyed wolves through the forest, spreading in a vast semi-circle and combing it as they ran. That they had not picked up my trail was evidenced by their silence, for they never yell except when they believe only a short dash is ahead of them, and feel sure of their prey.____The warrior who heard the sounds of my flight could not have been one of that party, for he was too far ahead of them. He must have been a scout ranging the forest to guard against his comrades being surprised from the north.____At any rate he heard me running close to him, and came like a devil of the black night. I knew of him first only by the swift faint pad of his naked feet, and when I wheeled I could not even make out the dim bulk of him, but only heard the soft thudding of those inexorable feet coming to me unseen in the darkness.____They see like cats in the dark, and I know he saw well enough to locate me, though doubtless I was only a dim blur in the darkness. But my blindly upswung hatchet met his falling knife and he impaled himself on my knife as he lunged in, his death-yell ringing like a peal of doom under the forest-roof. And it was answered by a ferocious clamor to the south, only a few hundred yards away, and then they were racing through the bushes giving tongue like wolves, certain of their quarry.____I ran for it in good earnest now, abandoning stealth entirely for the sake of speed, and trusting to luck that I would not dash out my brains against a tree-stem in the darkness.____But here the forest opened up somewhat; there was no underbrush, and something

almost like light filtered in through the branches, for the clouds were clearing a little. And through this forest I fled like a damned soul pursued by demons, hearing the yells at first rising higher and higher in blood-thirsty triumph, then edged with anger and rage as they grew fainter and fell away behind me, for in a straight-away race no Pict can match the long legs of a white forest-runner. The desperate risk was that there were other scouts or war-parties ahead of me who could easily cut me off, hearing my flight; but it was a risk I had to take. But no painted figures started up like phantoms out of the shadows ahead of me, and presently, through the thickening growth that betokened the nearness of a creek, I saw a glimmer through the trees far ahead of me and knew it was the light of Fort Kwanyara, the southernmost outpost of Schohira._____2_____Perhaps, before continuing with this chronicle of the bloody years, it might be well were I to give an account of myself, and the reason why I traversed the Pictish Wilderness, by night and alone.____My name is Gault Hagar's son. I was born in the province of Conajohara. But when I was ten years of age, the Picts broke over Black River and stormed Fort Tuscelan and slew all within save one man, and drove all the settlers of the province east of Thunder River. Conajohara became again part of the Wilderness, haunted only by wild beasts and wild men. The people of Conajohara scattered throughout the Westermarck, in Schohira, Conawaga, or Oriskawny, but many of them went southward and settled near Fort Thandara, an isolated outpost on the Warhorse River, my family among them. There they were later joined by other settlers for whom the older provinces were too thickly inhabited, and presently there grew up the district known as the Free Province of Thandara, because it was not like the other provinces, royal grants to great lords east of the marches and settled by them, but cut out of the wilderness by the pioneers themselves without aid of the Aquilonian nobility. We paid no taxes to any baron. Our governor was not appointed by any lord, but we elected him ourselves, from our own people, and he was responsible only to the king. We manned and built our forts ourselves, and sustained ourselves in war as in peace. And Mitra knows war was a constant state of affairs, for there was never peace between us and our savage neighbors, the wild Panther, Alligator and Otter tribes of Picts.____But we thrived, and seldom questioned what went on east of the marches in the kingdom whence our grandsires had come. But at last events in Aquilonia did touch upon us in the wilderness. Word came of civil war, and a fighting man risen to wrest the throne from the ancient dynasty. And sparks from that conflagration set the frontier ablaze, and turned neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother. And it was because knights in their gleaming steel were fighting and slaying on the plains of Aquilonia that I was hastening alone through the stretch of wilderness that separated Thandara from Schohira, with news that might well change the destiny of all the Westermarck.____Fort Kwanyara was a small outpost, a square fortress of hewn logs with a palisade on the bank of Knife Creek. I saw its banner streaming against the pale rose of the morning sky, and noted that only the ensign of the province floated there. The royal standard that should have risen above it, flaunting the golden serpent, was not in evidence. That might mean much, or nothing. We of the frontier are careless about the delicate punctilios of custom and etiquette which mean so much to the knights beyond the marches.____I crossed Knife Creek in the early dawn, wading through the shallows, and was challenged by a picket on the other bank, a tall man in the buckskins of a ranger. When he knew I was from Thandara: 'By Mirra!' quoth he, 'your business must be urgent, that you

cross the wilderness instead of taking the longer road.'___For Thandara was separated from the other provinces, as I have said, and the Little Wilderness lay between it and the Bossonian marches; but a safe road ran through it into the marches and thence to the other provinces but it was a long and tedious road.___Then he asked for news from Thandara, but I told him I knew little of the latest events, having just returned from a long scout into the country of the Ottermen, which was a lie, but I had no way of knowing Schohira's political color, and was not inclined to betray my own until I knew. Then I asked him if Hakon Strom's son was in Fort Kwanyara, and he told me that the man I sought was not in the fort, but was at the town of Schondara, which lay a few miles east of the fort.___'I hope Thandara declares for Conan,' said he with an oath, 'for I tell you plainly it is our political complexion. And it is my cursed luck which keeps me here with the handful of rangers who watch the border for raiding Picts. I would give my bow and hunting shirt to be with your army which lies even now at Thenitea on Ogaha Creek waiting the onslaught of Brocas of Torh with his damned renegades.'___I said naught but was astounded. This was news indeed. For the Baron of Torh was lord of Conawaga, not Schohira, whose patron was Lord Thasperas of Kormon.___'Where is Thasperas?' I asked, and the ranger answered, a thought shortly: 'Away in Aquilonia, fighting for Conan.' And he looked at me narrowly as if he had begun to wonder if I were a spy.___'Is there a man in Schohira,' I began, 'who has such connections with the Picts that he dwells, naked and painted among them, and attends their ceremonies of blood-feast and?''___I checked myself at the fury that contorted the Schohira's features.___'Damn you,' says he, choking with passion, 'what is your purpose in coming here to insult us thus?''___And indeed, to call a man a renegade was the direst insult that could be offered along the Westermarck, though I had not meant it in that way. But I saw the man was ignorant of any knowledge concerning the renegade I had seen, and not wishing to give out information, I merely told him that he misunderstood my meaning.___'I understand it well enough,' said he, shaking with passion. 'But for your dark skin and southern accent I would deem you a spy from Conawaga. But spy or no, you cannot insult the men of Schohira in such manner. Were I not on military duty I would lay down my weapon-belt and show you what manner of men we breed in Schohira.'___'I want no quarrel,' said I. 'But I am going to Schondara, where it will not be hard for you to find me, if you so desire.'___'I will be there anon,' quoth he grimly. 'I am Storm Grom's son and they know me in Schohira.'___I left him striding his post along the bank, and fingering his knife hilt and hatchet as if he itched to try their edge on my head, and I swung wide of the small fort to avoid other scouts or pickets. For in these troublous times suspicion might fall on me as a spy very easily. Nay, this Storm Grom's son was beginning to turn such thoughts in his thick noddle when they were swept away by his personal resentment at what he mistook for a slur. And having quarreled with me, his sense of personal honor would not allow him to arrest me on suspicion of being a spy - even had he thought of it. In ordinary times none would think of halting or questioning a white man crossing the border ? but everything was in a mad whirl now - it must be, if the patrol of Conawaga was invading the domain of his neighbors.___The forest had been cleared about the fort for a few hundred yards in each direction, forming a solid green wall. I kept within this wall as I skirted the clearing, and met no one, even when I crossed several paths leading from the fort. I avoided clearings and farms. I headed eastward and the sun was not high in the heavens when I sighted the roofs of

Schondara.____The forest ran to within less than half a mile of the town, which was a handsome one for a frontier village, with neat houses mostly of squared logs, some painted, but also some fine frame buildings which is something we have not in Thandara. But there was not so much as a ditch or a palisade about the village, which was strange to me. For we of Thandara build our dwelling places for defense as much as shelter, and while there is not a village in the width and breadth of the province, yet every cabin is like a tiny fort.____Off to the right of the village stood a fort, in the midst of a meadow, with palisade and ditch, somewhat larger than Fort Kwanyara, but I saw few heads moving above the parapet, either helmeted or capped. And only the spreading winged hawk of Schohira flapped on the standard. And I wondered why, if Schohira were for Conan, they did not fly the banner he had chosen - the golden lion on a black field, the standard of the regiment he commanded as a mercenary general of Aquilonia.____Away to the left, at the edge of the forest I saw a large house of stone set amid gardens and orchards, and knew it for the estate of Lord Valerian, the richest land-owner in western Schohira. I had never seen the man, but knew he was wealthy and powerful. But now the Hall, as it was called, seemed deserted.____The town seemed curiously deserted, likewise; at least of men, though there were women and children in plenty, and it seemed to me that the men had assembled their families here for safety. I saw few able-bodied men. As I went up the street many eyes followed me suspiciously, but none spoke except to reply briefly to my questions.____At the tavern only a few old men and cripples huddled about the ale-stained tables and conversed in low tones, all conversation ceasing as I loomed in the doorway in my worn buckskins, and all turned to stare at me silently.____More significant silence when I asked for Hakon Strom's son, and the host told me that Hakon was ridden to Thenitea shortly after sun-up, where the militia-army lay encamped, but would return shortly. So being hungry and weary, I ate a meal in the taproom, aware of those questioning eyes fixed on me, and then lay down in a corner on a bear skin the host fetched for me, and slept. And was so slumbering when Hakon Strom's son returned, close upon sunset.____He was a tall man, rangy and broad-shouldered, like most Westlanders, and clad in buckskin hunting shirt and fringed leggings and moccasins like myself. Half a dozen rangers were with him, and they sat them down at a board close to the door and watched him and me over the rims of their ale jacks.____When I named myself and told him I had word for him, he looked at me closely, and bade me sit with him at a table in the corner where mine host brought us ale foaming in leathern jacks.____'Has no word come through of the state of affairs in Than-dara?' I asked.____'No sure word; only rumors.'____'Very well,' I said. 'I bring you word from Brant Drago's son, governor of Thandara, and the council of captains, and by this sign you shall know me for a true man.' And so saying I dipped my finger in the foamy ale and with it drew a symbol on the table, and instantly erased it. He nodded, his eyes blazing with interest.____'This is the word I bring you,' quoth I; 'Thandara has declared for Conan and stands ready to aid his friends and defy his enemies.'____At that he smiled joyfully and grasped my brown hand warmly with his own rugged fingers.____'Good!' he exclaimed. 'But it is no more than I expected.'____'What man of Thandara could forget Conan?' said I. 'Nay, I was but a child in Conajohara, but I remember him when he was a forest-runner and a scout there. When his rider came into Thandara telling us that Poitain was in revolt, with Conan striking for the throne, and asking our support - he asked no volunteers for his army, merely our loyalty - we sent him one word: "We

have not forgotten Conajohara." Then came the Baron Attelius over the marches against us, but we ambushed him in the Little Wilderness and cut his army to pieces. And now I think we need fear no invasion in Thandara.'___'I would I could say as much for Schohira,' he said grimly. 'Baron Thasperas sent us word that we could do as we chose -he has declared for Conan and joined the rebel army. But he did not demand western levies. Nay, both he and Conan know the Westermarck needs every man it has to guard the border.'___'He removed his troops from the forts, however, and we manned them with our own foresters. There was some little skirmishing among ourselves, especially in the towns like Goy-aga, where dwell the land-holders, for some of them held to Namedides - well, these loyalists either fled away to Conawaga with their retainers, or else surrendered and gave their pledge to remain neutral in their castles, like Lord Valerian of Schon-dara. The loyalists who fled swore to return and cut all our throats. And presently Lord Brocas marched over the border.'___'In Conawaga the land-owners and Brocas are for Namedides, and we have heard pitiful tales of their treatment of the common people who favor Conan.'___I nodded, not surprised. Conawaga was the largest, richest and most thickly settled province in all the Westermarck, and it had a comparatively large, and very powerful class of titled landholders - which we have not in Thandara, and by the favor of Mitra, never shall.'___'It is an open invasion for conquest,' said Hakon. 'Brocas commanded us to swear loyalty to Namedides - the dog. I think the black-jowled fool plots to subdue all the Westermarck and rule it as Namedides' viceroy. With an army of Aquilonian men-at-arms, Bossonian archers, Conawaga loyalists, and Scho-hira renegades, he lies at Coyaga, ten miles beyond Ogaha Creek. Thenitea is full of refugees from the eastern country he has devastated.'___'We do not fear him, though we are outnumbered. He must cross Ogaha Creek to strike us, and we have fortified the west bank and blocked the road against his cavalry.'___'That touches upon my mission,' I said. 'I am authorized to offer the services of a hundred and fifty Thandaran rangers. We are all of one mind in Thandara and fight no internal wars; and we can spare that many men from our war with the Panther Picts.'___'That will be good news for the commandant of Fort Kwanyara!''___'What?' quoth I. 'Are you not the commandant?''___'Nay,' said he, 'it is my brother Dirk Strom's son.'___'Had I known that I would have given my message to him,' I said. 'Brant Drago's son thought you commanded Kwanyara. However, it does not matter.'___'Another jack of ale,' quoth Hakon, 'and we'll start for the fort so that Dirk shall hear your news first-hand. A plague on commanding a fort. A party of scouts is good enough for me.'___And in truth Hakon was not the man to command an outpost or any large body of men, for he was too reckless and hasty, though a brave man and a gay rogue.'___'You have but a skeleton force left to watch the border,' I said. 'What of the Picts?''___'They keep the peace to which they swore,' answered he. 'For some months there has been peace along the border, except for the usual skirmishing between individuals of both races.'___'Valerian Hall seemed deserted.'___'Lord Valerian dwells there alone except for a few servants. Where his fighting men have gone, none knows. But he has sent them off. If he had not given his pledge we would have felt it necessary to place him under guard, for he is one of the few white men to whom the Picts give heed. If it had entered his head to stir them up against our borders we might be hard put to it to defend ourselves against them on one side and Brocas on the other.'___'The Hawks, Wildcats and Turtles listen when Valerian speaks, and he has even visited the towns of the Wolf Picts and come

away alive.'___If that were true that were strange indeed, for all men knew the ferocity of the great confederacy of allied clans known as the Wolf tribe which dwelt in the west beyond the hunting grounds of the three lesser tribes he had named. Mostly they held aloof from the frontier, but the threat of their hatred was ever a menace along the borders of Schohira. ___Hakon looked up as a tall man in trunk-hose, boots and scarlet cloak entered the taproom. ___'There is Lord Valerian now,' he said. ___I stared, started and was on my feet instantly. ___'That man?' I ejaculated. 'I saw that man last night beyond the border, in a camp of the Hawks, watching the Dance of the Changing Snake!' ___Valerian heard me and he whirled, going pale. His eyes blazed like those of a panther. ___Hakon sprang up too. ___'What are you saying?' he cried. 'Lord Valerian gave his pledge?' ___'I care not!' I exclaimed fiercely, striding forward to confront the tall noble. 'I saw him where I lay hidden among the tamarack. I could not mistake that hawk-like face. I tell you he was there, naked and painted like a Pict? ___'You lie, damn you!' cried Valerian, and whipping aside his cloak he caught at the hilt of his sword. But before he could draw it I closed with him and bore him to the floor, where he caught at my throat with both hands, blaspheming like a madman. Then there was a swift stamp of feet, and men were dragging us apart, grasping my lord firmly, who stood white and panting with fury, still clutching my neckcloth which had been torn away from my throat in the struggle. ___'Loose me, you dogs!' he raved. 'Take your peasant hands from me! I'll cleave this liar to the chin?' ___'Here is no lie,' I said more calmly. 'I lay in the tamarack last night and watched while old Teyanoga dragged a Raven chiefs soul from his body and forced it into that of a tree-serpent. It was my arrow which struck down the shaman. And I saw you there - you, a white man, naked and painted, accepted as one of the clan.' ___'If this be true?' began Hakon. ___'It is true, and there is your proof!' I exclaimed. 'Look there! On his bosom!' ___His doublet and shirt had been torn open in the scuffle, and there, dim on his naked breast, showed the outline of the white skull which the Picts paint only when they mean war against the whites. He had sought to wash it off his skin, but Pictish paint stains strongly. ___'Disarm him,' said Hakon, white to the lips. 'Give me my neckcloth,' I demanded, but his lordship spat at me, and thrust the cloth inside his shirt. ___'When it is returned to you it shall be knotted in a hangman's noose about your rebel neck,' he snarled. Hakon seemed undecided. ___'Let us take him to the fort,' I said. 'Give him in custody of the commander. It was for no good purpose he took part in the Dance of the Snake. Those Picts were painted for battle. That symbol on his breast means he intended to take part in the war for which they danced.' ___'But great Mitra, this is incredible!' exclaimed Hakon. 'A white man, loosing those painted devils on his friends and neighbors?' ___My lord said naught. He stood there between the men who grasped his arms, livid, his thin lips drawn back in a snarl that bared his teeth, but all hell burned like yellow fire in his eyes where I seemed to sense lights of madness. ___But Hakon was uncertain. He dared not release Valerian, and he feared what the effect might be on the people if they saw the lord being led a captive to the fort. ___'They will demand the reason,' he argued, 'and when they learn he has been dealing with the Picts in their war-paint, a panic might well ensue. Let us lock him into the gaol until we can bring Dirk here to question him.' ___'It is dangerous to compromise with a situation like this,' I answered bluntly. 'But it is for you to decide. You are in command here.' ___So we took his lordship out the back door, secretly, and it being dusk by that time, reached the gaol without

being noticed by the people, who indeed stayed indoors mostly. The gaol was a small affair of logs, somewhat apart from the town, with four cells, and one only occupied, that by a fat rogue who had been imprisoned overnight for drunkenness and fighting in the street. He stared to see our prisoner. Not a word said Lord Valerian as Hakon locked the grilled door upon him, and detailed one of the men to stand guard. But a demon fire burned in his dark eyes as if behind the mask of his pale face he were laughing at us with fiendish triumph. 'You place only one man on guard?' I asked Hakon. 'Why more?' said he. 'Valerian cannot break out, and there is no one to rescue him.' It seemed to me that Hakon was prone to take too much for granted, but after all, it was none of my affair, so I said no more. Then Hakon and I went to the fort, and there I talked with Dirk Strom's son, the commander, who was in command of the town, in the absence of Jon Storm's son, the governor appointed by Lord Thasperas, who was now in command of the militia-army which lay at Thenitea. He looked sober indeed when he heard my tale, and said he would come to the gaol and question Lord Valerian as soon as his duties permitted, though he had little belief that my lord would talk, for he came of a stubborn and haughty breed. He was glad to hear of the men Thandara offered him, and told me that he could find a man to return to Thandara accepting the offer, if I wished to remain in Schohira awhile, which I did. Then I returned to the tavern with Hakon, for it was our purpose to sleep there that night, and set out for Thenitea in the morning. Scouts kept the Schohirans posted on the movements of Brocas, and Hakon, who had been in their camp that day, said Brocas showed no signs of moving against us, which made me believe that he was waiting for Valerian to lead his Picts against the border. But Hakon still doubted, in spite of all I had told him, believing Valerian had but visited the Picts through friendliness as he often did. But I pointed out that no white man, however friendly to the Picts, was ever allowed to witness such a ceremony as the Dance of the Snake; he would have to be a blood-member of the clan.

3

I awakened suddenly and sat up in bed. My window was open, both shutters and pane, for coolness, for it was an upstairs room, and there was no tree near by which a thief might gain access. But some noise had awakened me, and now as I stared at the window, I saw the star-lit sky blotted out by a bulky, misshapen figure. I swung my legs around off the bed, demanding to know who it was, and groping for my hatchet, but the thing was on me with frightful speed and before I could even rise something was around my neck, choking and strangling me. Thrust almost against my face there was a dim frightful visage, but all I could make out in the darkness was a pair of flaming red eyes, and a peaked head. My nostrils were filled with a bestial reek. I caught one of the thing's wrists and it was hairy as an ape's, and thick with iron muscles. But then I had found the haft of my hatchet and I lifted it and split that misshapen skull with one blow. It fell clear of me and I sprang up, gagging and gasping, and quivering in every limb. I found flint, steel and tinder, and struck a light and lit a candle, and glared wildly at the creature lying on the floor. In form it was like a man, gnarled and misshapen, covered with thick hair. Its nails were long and black, like the talons of a beast, and its chinless, low-browed head was like that of an ape. The thing was a Cbakan, one of those semi-human beings which dwell deep in the forests. There came a knocking on my door and Hakon's voice called to know what the trouble was, so I bade him enter. He rushed in, ax in hand, his eyes widened at the sight of the thing on the floor. 'A Chakan!' he whispered. 'I have seen them, far to the west,

smelling out trails through the forests - the damned bloodhounds! What is that in his fingers?'___A chill of horror crept along my spine as I saw the creature still clutched a neckcloth in his fingers - the cloth which he had tried to knot like a hangman's noose about my neck. ___'I have heard that Pictish shamans catch these creatures and tame them and use them to smell out their enemies,' he said slowly. 'But how could Lord Valerian so use one?'___'I know not,' I answered. 'But that neck cloth was given to the beast, and according to its nature it smelled my trail out and sought to break my neck. Let us go to the gaol, and quickly.'___Hakon roused his rangers and we hurried there, and found the guard lying before the open door of Valerian's empty cell with his throat cut. Hakon stood like one turned to stone, and then a faint call made us turn and we saw the white face of the drunkard peering at us from the next cell. ___'He's gone,' quoth he; 'Lord Valerian's gone. Hark'ee; an hour ago while I lay on my bunk, I was awakened by a sound outside, and saw a strange dark woman come out of the shadows and walk up to the guard. He lifted his bow and bade her halt, but she laughed at him, staring into his eyes and he became as one in a trance. He stood staring stupidly - and Mitra, he took his own knife from his girdle and cut his throat, and he fell down and died. Then she took the keys from his belt and opened the door, and Valerian came out, and laughed like a devil out of hell, and kissed the wench, and she laughed with him. And she was not alone, for something lurked in the shadows behind her - some vague, monstrous being that never came into the light of the lanthorn hanging over the door. ___'I heard her say best to kill the fat drunkard in the next cell, and by Mitra I was so nigh dead of fright I knew not if I were even alive. But Valerian said I was dead drunk, and I could have kissed him for that word. So they went away and as they went he said he would send her companion on a mission, and then they would go to a cabin on Lynx Creek, and there meet his retainers who had been hiding in the forest ever since he sent them from Valerian Hall. He said that Teyanoga would come to them there and they would cross the border and go among the Picts, and bring them back to cut all our throats.'___Hakon looked livid in the lanthorn light. ___'Who is this woman?' I asked curiously. ___'His half-breed Pictish mistress,' he said. 'Half Hawk-Pict and half-Ligurean. I have heard of her. They call her the witch of Skandaga. I have never seen her, never before credited the tales whispered of her and Lord Valerian. But it is the truth.'___'I thought I had slain old Teyanoga,' I muttered. 'The old fiend must bear a charmed life - I saw my shaft quivering in his breast. What now?'___'We must go to the hut on Lynx Creek and slay them all,' said Hakon. 'If they loose the Picts on the border hell will be to pay. We can spare no men from the fort or the town. We are enough. I know not how many men there will be on Lynx Creek, and I do not care. We will take them by surprise.'___We set out at once through the starlight. The land lay silent, lights twinkling dimly in the houses. To the westward loomed the black forest, silent, primordial, a brooding threat to the people who dared it. ___We went in single file, bows strung and held in our left hands, hatchets swinging in our right hands. Our moccasins made no sound in the dew-wet grass. We melted into the woods and struck a trail that wound among oaks and alders. Here we strung out with some fifteen feet between each man, Hakon leading, and presently we dipped down into a grassy hollow and saw light streaming faintly from the cracks of shutters that covered a cabin's windows. ___Hakon halted us and whispered for the men to wait, while we crept forward and spied upon them. We stole forward and surprised the sentry - a Schohiran renegade, who must have heard our stealthy

approach but for the wine which staled his breath. I shall never forget the fierce hiss of satisfaction that breathed between Hakon's clenched teeth as he drove his knife into the villain's heart. We left the body hidden in the tall rank grass and stole up to the very wall of the cabin and dared to peer in at a crack. There was Valerian, with his fierce eyes blazing, and a dark, wildly beautiful girl in doeskin loin-clout and beaded moccasins, and her blackly burnished hair bound back by a gold band, curiously wrought. And there were half a dozen Schohiran renegades, sullen rogues in the woollen breeches and jerkins of farmers, with cutlasses at their belts, three forest-runners in buckskins, wild-looking men, and half a dozen Gundermen guards, compactly-built men with yellow hair cut square and confined under steel caps, corselets of chain mail, and polished leg-pieces. They were girt with swords and daggers - yellow-haired men with fair complexions and steely eyes and an accent differing greatly from the natives of the Westermarck. They were sturdy fighters, ruthless and well-disciplined, and very popular as guardsmen among the landowners of the frontier. Listening there we heard them all laughing and conversing, Valerian boastful of his escape and swearing that he had sent a visitor to that cursed Thandaran that should do his proper business for him; the renegades sullen and full of oaths and curses for their former friends; the forest-runners silent and attentive; the Gundermen careless and jovial, which joviality thinly masked their utterly ruthless natures. And the half-breed girl, whom they called Kwarada, laughed, and plagued Valerian, who seemed grimly amused. And Hakon trembled with fury as we listened to him boasting how he meant to rouse the Picts and lead them across the border to smite the Schohirans in the back while Brocas attacked from Coyaga. Then we heard a light patter of feet and hugged the wall close, and saw the door open, and seven painted Picts entered, horrific figures in paint and feathers. They were led by old Teyanoga, whose breast-muscles were bandaged, whereby I knew my shaft had but fleshed itself in those heavy muscles. And wondered if the old demon were really a werewolf which could not be killed by mortal weapons as he boasted and many believed. We lay close there, Hakon and I, and heard Teyanoga say that the Hawks, Wildcats and Turtles dared not strike across the border unless an alliance with the powerful Wolfmen could be struck up, for they feared that the Wolves might ravage their country while they fought the Schohirans. Teyanoga said that the three lesser tribes met the Wolves on the edge of Ghost Swamp for a council; and that the Wolves would abide by the counsel of the Wizard of the Swamp. So Valerian said they would go to the Ghost Swamp and see if they could not persuade the Wizard to induce the Wolves to join the others. At that Hakon told me to crawl back and get the others, and I saw it was in his mind that we should attack, outnumbered as we were, but so fired was I by the infamous plot to which we had listened that I was as eager as he. I stole back and brought the others, and as soon as he heard us coming, he sprang up and ran at the door to beat it in with his war-ax. At the same instant others of us burst in the shutters and poured arrows into the room, striking down some and set the cabin on fire. They were thrown into confusion, and made no attempt to hold the cabin. The candles were upset and went out, but the fire lent a dim glow. They rushed the door and some were slain then, and others as we grappled with them. But presently all fled into the woods except those we slew, Gundermen, renegades and painted Picts, but Valerian and the girl were still in the cabin. Then they came forth and she laughed and hurled something on the ground that burst and blinded us with a foul smoke,

through which they escaped. All but four of our men had been slain in the desperate fighting, but we started instantly in pursuit, sending back one of the wounded men to warn the town. The trail led into the wilderness. We followed, and in fights and skirmishes slew several others, and presently all our men were slain except Hakon and I. We trailed Valerian across the border and into a camp of the war-tribes near Ghost Swamp, where the chiefs were going to consult the Wizard, a pre-Pictish shaman. We trailed Valerian into the swamp, he going secretly to give the shamans instructions, and Hakon waited on the trail to slay Valerian while I stole into the swamp to slay the Wizard. But both of us were captured by the Wizard, who gave his consent to the war and gave them a ghastly magic to use against the white men, and the tribes went howling toward the border. But Hakon and I escaped and slew the Wizard and followed, in time to turn their magic against them, and rout them.

THE PHOENIX ON THE SWORD

'Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars - Nemedias, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet.' The Nemedian Chronicles 1

Over shadowy spires and gleaming towers lay the ghostly darkness and silence that runs before dawn. Into a dim alley, one of a veritable labyrinth of mysterious winding ways, four masked figures came hurriedly from a door which a dusky hand furtively opened. They spoke not but went swiftly into the gloom, cloaks wrapped closely about them; as silently as the ghosts of murdered men they disappeared in the darkness. Behind them a sardonic countenance was framed in the partly opened door; a pair of evil eyes glittered malevolently in the gloom. 'Go into the night, creatures of the night,' a voice mocked. 'Oh, fools, your doom hounds your heels like a blind dog, and you know it not.' The speaker closed the door and bolted it, then turned and went up the corridor, candle in hand. He was a somber giant, whose dusky skin revealed his Stygian blood. He came into an inner chamber, where a tall, lean man in worn velvet lounged like a great lazy cat on a silken couch, sipping wine from a huge golden goblet. 'Well, Ascalante,' said the Stygian, setting down the candle, 'your dupes have slunk into the streets like rats from their burrows. You work with strange tools.' 'Tools?' replied Ascalante. 'Why, they consider me that. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from the southern desert, I have been living in the very heart of my enemies, hiding by day in this obscure house, skulking through dark alleys and darker corridors at night. And I have accomplished what those rebellious nobles could not. Working through them, and through other agents, many of whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with sedition and unrest. In short I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who sits throned in the sun. By Mitra, I was a statesman before I was an outlaw.' 'And these dupes who deem themselves your masters?' 'They will continue to think that I serve them, until our present task is completed. Who are they to match wits with Ascalante? Volmana, the

dwarfish count of Karaban; Gromel, the giant commander of the Black Legion; Dion, the fat baron of Attalus; Rinaldo, the hare-brained minstrel. I am the force which has welded together the steel in each, and by the clay in each, I will crush them when the time comes. But that lies in the future; tonight the king dies.'___'Days ago I saw the imperial squadrons ride from the city,' said the Stygian.___'They rode to the frontier which the heathen Picts assail -thanks to the strong liquor which I've smuggled over the borders to madden them. Dion's great wealth made that possible. And Volmana made it possible to dispose of the rest of the imperial troops which remained in the city. Through his princely kin in Nemedra, it was easy to persuade King Numa to request the presence of Count Trocero of Poitain, seneschal of Aquilonia; and of course, to do him honor, he'll be accompanied by an imperial escort, as well as his own troops, and Prospero, King Conan's right-hand man. That leaves only the king's personal bodyguard in the city - besides the Black Legion. Through Gromel I've corrupted a spendthrift officer of that guard, and bribed him to lead his men away from the king's door at midnight.___'Then, with sixteen desperate rogues of mine, we enter the palace by a secret tunnel. After the deed is done, even if the people do not rise to welcome us, Gromel's Black Legion will be sufficient to hold the city and the crown.'___'And Dion thinks that crown will be given to him?'___'Yes. The fat fool claims it by reason of a trace of royal blood. Conan makes a bad mistake in letting men live who still boast descent from the old dynasty, from which he tore the crown of Aquilonia.___'Volmana wishes to be reinstated in royal favor as he was under the old regime, so that he may lift his poverty-ridden estates to their former grandeur. Gromel hates Pallantides, commander of the Black Dragons, and desires the command of the whole army, with all the stubbornness of the Bossonian. Alone of us all, Rinaldo has no personal ambition. He sees in Conan a red-handed, rough-footed barbarian who came out of the north to plunder a civilized land. He idealizes the king whom Conan killed to get the crown, remembering only that he occasionally patronized the arts, and forgetting the evils of his reign, and he is making the people forget. Already they openly sing The Lament for the King in which Rinaldo lauds the sainted villain and denounces Conan as "that black-hearted savage from the abyss." Conan laughs, but the people snarl.'___'Why does he hate Conan?'___'Poets always hate those in power. To them perfection is always just behind the last corner, or beyond the next. They escape the present in dreams of the past and future. Rinaldo is a flaming torch of idealism, rising, as he thinks, to overthrow a tyrant and liberate the people. As for me - well, a few months ago I had lost all ambition but to raid the caravans for the rest of my life; now old dreams stir. Conan will die; Dion will mount the throne. Then he, too, will die. One by one, all who oppose me will die - by fire, or steel, or those deadly wines you know so well how to brew. Ascalante, king of Aquilonia! How like you the sound of it?'___The Stygian shrugged his broad shoulders. 'There was a time,' he said with unconcealed bitterness, 'when I, too, had my ambitions, beside which yours seem tawdry and childish. To what a state I have fallen! My old-time peers and rivals would stare indeed could they see Thoth-Amon of the Ring serving as the slave of an outlander, and an outlaw at that; and aiding in the petty ambitions of barons and kings!'___'You laid your trust in magic and mummery,' answered Ascalante carelessly. 'I trust my wits and my sword.'___'Wits and swords are as straws against the wisdom of the Darkness,' growled the Stygian, his dark eyes flickering with menacing lights and shadows. 'Had I not lost the Ring, our positions might be

reversed.'___'Nevertheless,' answered the outlaw impatiently, 'you wear the stripes of my whip on your back, and are likely to continue to wear them.'___'Be not so sure!' the fiendish hatred of the Stygian glittered for an instant redly in his eyes. 'Some day, somehow, I will find the Ring again, and when I do, by the serpent-fangs of Set, you shall pay?'

___The hot-tempered Aquilonian started up and struck him heavily across the mouth. Thoth reeled back, blood starting from his lips. ___'You grow over-bold, dog,' growled the outlaw. 'Have a care; I am still your master who knows your dark secret. Go upon the housetops and shout that Ascalante is in the city plotting against the king - if you dare.' ___'I dare not,' muttered the Stygian, wiping the blood from his lips. ___'No, you do not dare,' Ascalante grinned bleakly. 'For if I die by your stealth or treachery, a hermit priest in the southern desert will know of it, and will break the seal of a manuscript I left in his hands. And having read, a word will be whispered in Stygia, and a wind will creep up from the south by midnight. And where will you hide your head, Thoth-Amon?'

___The slave shuddered and his dusky face went ashen. ___'Enough!' Ascalante changed his tone peremptorily. 'I have work for you. I do not trust Dion. I bade him ride to his country estate and remain there until the work tonight is done. The fat fool could never conceal his nervousness before the king today. Ride after him, and if you do not overtake him on the road, proceed to his estate and remain with him until we send for him. Don't let him out of your sight. He is mazed with fear, and might bolt - might even rush to Conan in a panic, and reveal the whole plot, hoping thus to save his own hide. Go!'

___The slave bowed, hiding the hate in his eyes, and did as he was bidden. Ascalante turned again to his wine. Over the jeweled spires was rising a dawn crimson as blood. _____2_____

When I was a fighting-man, the kettle-drums they beat; ___The people scattered gold-dust before my horse's feet; ___But now I am a great king, the people hound my track ___With poison in my -wine-cup, and daggers at my back. ___The Road of Kings_____

The room was large and ornate, with rich tapestries on the polished panelled walls, deep rugs on the ivory floor, and with the lofty ceiling adorned with intricate carvings and silver scrollwork. Behind an ivory, gold-inlaid writing-table sat a man whose broad shoulders and sun-browned skin seemed out of place among those luxuriant surroundings. He seemed more a part of the sun and winds and high places of the outlands. His slightest movement spoke of steel-spring muscles knit to a keen brain with the co-ordination of a born fighting-man. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his actions. Either he was perfectly at rest - still as a bronze statue - or else he was in motion, not with the jerky quickness of over-tense nerves, but with a catlike speed that blurred the sight which tried to follow him. His garments were of rich fabric, but simply made. He wore no ring or ornaments, and his square-cut black mane was confined merely by a cloth-of-silver band about his head. ___Now he laid down the golden stylus with which he had been laboriously scrawling on waxed papyrus, rested his chin on his fist, and fixed his smoldering blue eyes enviously on the man who stood before him. This person was occupied in his own affairs at the moment, for he was taking up the laces of his gold-chased armor, and abstractedly whistling - a rather unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king. ___'Prospero,' said the man at the table, 'these matters of statecraft weary me as all the fighting I have done never did.' ___'All part of the game, Conan,' answered the dark-eyed Poitan-ian. 'You are king - you must play the part.' ___'I wish I might ride with you to Nemediia,' said Conan enviously. 'It seems ages since I had a horse

between my knees - but Publius says that affairs in the city require my presence. Curse him!___'When I overthrew the old dynasty,' he continued, speaking with the easy familiarity which existed only between the Poitan-ian and himself, 'it was easy enough, though it seemed bitter hard at the time. Looking back now over the wild path I followed, all those days of toil, intrigue, slaughter and tribulation seem like a dream. ___'I did not dream far enough, Prospero. When King Namedi-des lay dead at my feet and I tore the crown from his gory head and set it on my own, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. I had prepared myself to take the crown, not to hold it. In the old free days all I wanted was a sharp sword and a straight path to my enemies. Now no paths are straight and my sword is useless. ___'When I overthrew Namedides, then I was the Liberator -now they spit at my shadow. They have put a statue of that swine in the temple of Mitra, and people go and wail before it, hailing it as the holy effigy of a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red-handed barbarian. When I led her armies to victory as a mercenary, Aquilonia overlooked the fact that I was a foreigner, but now she can not forgive me. ___'Now in Mitra's temple there come to burn incense to Namedides' memory, men whom his hangmen maimed and blinded, men whose sons died in his dungeons, whose wives and daughters were dragged into his seraglio. The fickle fools! ___'Rinaldo is largely responsible,' answered Prospero, drawing up his sword-belt 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 rimes for the vultures.' ___Conan shook his lion head. 'No, Prospero, he's beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. His songs are mightier than my scepter; for he has near ripped the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I shall die and be forgotten, but Rinaldo's songs will live for ever. ___'No, Prospero,' the king continued, a somber look of doubt shadowing his eyes, 'there is something hidden, some undercurrent of which we are not aware. I sense it as in my youth I sensed the tiger hidden in the tall grass. There is a nameless unrest throughout the kingdom. I am like a hunter who crouches by his small fire amid the forest, and hears stealthy feet padding in the darkness, and almost sees the glimmer of burning eyes. If I could but come to grips with something tangible, that I could cleave with my sword! I tell you, it's not by chance that the Picts have of late so fiercely assailed the frontiers, so that the Bossonians have called for aid to beat them back. I should have ridden with the troops.' ___'Publius feared a plot to trap and slay you beyond the frontier,' replied Prospero, smoothing his silken surcoat over his shining mail, and admiring his tall lithe figure in a silver mirror. 'That's why he urged you to remain in the city. These doubts are born of your barbarian instincts. Let the people snarl! The mercenaries are ours, and the Black Dragons, and every rogue in Poitain swears by you. Your only danger is assassination, and that's impossible, with men of the imperial troops guarding you day and night. What are you working at there?' ___'A map,' Conan answered with pride. 'The maps of the court show well the countries of south, east and west, but in the north they are vague and faulty. I am adding the northern lands myself. Here is Cimmeria, where I was born. And?' ___'Asgard and Vanaheim,' Prospero scanned the map. 'By Mitra, I had almost believed those countries to have been fabulous.' ___Conan grinned savagely, involuntarily touching the scars on his dark face. 'You had known otherwise, had you spent your youth on the northern frontiers of Cimmeria! Asgard lies to the north, and Vanaheim to the northwest of Cimmeria, and there is continual war along the borders.' ___'What manner of men are these

northern folk?' asked Prospero. ___ 'Tall and fair and blue-eyed. Their god is Ymir, the frost-giant, and each tribe has its own king. They are wayward and fierce. They fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night.' ___ 'Then I think you are like them,' laughed Prospero. 'You laugh greatly, drink deep and bellow good songs; though I never saw another Cimmerian who drank aught but water, or who ever laughed, or ever sang save to chant dismal dirges.' ___ 'Perhaps it's the land they live in,' answered the king. 'A gloomier land never was - all of hills, darkly wooded, under skies nearly always gray, with winds moaning drearily down the valleys.' ___ 'Little wonder men grow moody there,' quoth Prospero with a shrug of his shoulders, thinking of the smiling sun-washed plains and blue lazy rivers of Poitam, Aquilonia's southernmost province. ___ 'They have no hope here or hereafter,' answered Conan. 'Their gods are Crom and his dark race, who rule over a sunless place of everlasting mist, which is the world of the dead. Mitra! The ways of the y?sir were more to my liking.' ___ 'Well,' grinned Prospero, 'the dark hills of Cimmeria are far behind you. And now I go. I'll quaff a goblet of white Nemedian wine for you at Numa's court.' ___ 'Good,' grunted the king, 'but kiss Numa's dancing-girls for yourself only, lest you involve the states!' ___ His gusty laughter followed Prospero out of the chamber. _____3_____ Under the caverned pyramids great Set coils asleep; ___ Among the shadows of the tombs his dusky people creep. ___ I speak the Word from the hidden gulfs that never knew the sun? ___ Send me a servant for my hate, oh scaled and shining One! ___ The sun was setting, etching the green and hazy blue of the forest in brief gold. The waning beams glinted on the thick golden chain which Dion of Attalus twisted continually in his pudgy hand as he sat in the flaming riot of blossoms and flower-trees which was his garden. He shifted his fat body on his marble seat and glanced furtively about, as if in quest of a lurking enemy. He sat within a circular grove of slender trees, whose interlapping branches cast a thick shade over him. Near at hand a fountain tinkled silverly, and other unseen fountains in various parts of the great garden whispered an everlasting symphony. ___ Dion was alone except for the great dusky figure which lounged on a marble bench close at hand, watching the baron with deep somber eyes. Dion gave little thought to Thoth-Amon. He vaguely knew that he was a slave in whom Ascalante reposed much trust, but like so many rich men, Dion paid scant heed to men below his own station in life. ___ 'You need not be so nervous,' said Thoth. 'The plot can not fail.' ___ 'Ascalante can make mistakes as well as another,' snapped Dion, sweating at the mere thought of failure. ___ 'Not he,' grinned the Stygian savagely, 'else I had not been his slave, but his master.' ___ 'What talk is this?' peevishly returned Dion, with only half a mind on the conversation. ___ Thoth-Amon's eyes narrowed. For all his iron self-control, he was near bursting with long pent-up shame, hate and rage, ready to take any sort of a desperate chance. What he did not reckon on was the fact that Dion saw him, not as a human being with a brain and a wit, but simply a slave, and as such, a creature 'Listen to me,' said Thoth. 'You will be king. But you little know the mind of Ascalante. You can not trust him, once Conan is slain. I can help you. If you will protect me when you come to power, I will aid you.' ___ 'Listen, my lord. I was a great sorcerer in the south. Men spoke of Thoth-Amon as they spoke of Rammon. King Ctes-phon of Stygia gave me great honor, casting down the magicians from the high places to exalt me above them. They hated me, but they feared me, for I controlled beings from outside which came at my call and did my bidding. By Set, mine enemy knew not the hour when he might awake at midnight to feel

the taloned fingers of a nameless horror at his throat! I did dark and terrible magic with the Serpent Ring of Set, which I found in a nighted tomb a league beneath the earth, forgotten before the first man crawled out of the slimy sea.____'But a thief stole the Ring and my power was broken. The magicians rose up to slay me, and I fled. Disguised as a camel-driver, I was traveling in a caravan in the land of Koth, when Ascalante's reavers fell upon us. All in the caravan were slain except myself; I saved my life by revealing my identity to Ascalante and swearing to serve him. Bitter has been that bondage!____'To hold me fast, he wrote of me in a manuscript, and sealed it and gave it into the hands of a hermit who dwells on the southern borders of Koth. I dare not strike a dagger into him while he sleeps, or betray him to his enemies, for then the hermit would open the manuscript and read - thus Ascalante instructed him. And he would speak a word in Stygia?'____Again Thoth shuddered and an ashen hue tinged his dusky skin.____'Men knew me not in Aquilonia,' he said. 'But should my enemies in Stygia learn my whereabouts, not the width of half a world between us would suffice to save me from such a doom as would blast the soul of a bronze statue. Only a king with castles and hosts of swordsmen could protect me. So I have told you my secret, and urge that you make a pact with me. I can aid you with my wisdom, and you can protect me. And some day I will find the Ring?'____'Ring? Ring?' Thoth had underestimated the man's utter egoism. Dion had not even been listening to the slave's words, so completely engrossed was he in his own thoughts, but the final word stirred a ripple in his self-centeredness.____'Ring?' he repeated. 'That makes me remember - my ring of good fortune. I had it from a Shemitish thief who swore he stole it from a wizard far to the south, and that it would bring me luck. I paid him enough, Mitra knows. By the gods, I need all the luck I can have, what with Volmana and Ascalante dragging me into their bloody plots - I'll see to the ring.'____Thoth sprang up, blood mounting darkly to his face, while his eyes flamed with the stunned fury of a man who suddenly realizes the full depths of a fool's swinish stupidity. Dion never heeded him. Lifting a secret lid in the marble seat, he fumbled for a moment among a heap of gewgaws of various kinds -barbaric charms, bits of bones, pieces of tawdry jewelry - luck-pieces and conjures which the man's superstitious nature had prompted him to collect.____'Ah, here it is!' He triumphantly lifted a ring of curious make. It was of a metal like copper, and was made in the form of a scaled serpent, coiled in three loops, with its tail in its mouth. Its eyes were yellow gems which glittered balefully. Thoth-Amon cried out as if he had been struck, and Dion wheeled and gaped, his face suddenly bloodless. The slave's eyes were blazing, his mouth wide, his huge dusky hands outstretched like talons.____'The Ring! By Set! The Ring!' he shrieked. 'My Ring - stolen from me?'____Steel glittered in the Stygian's hand and with a heave of his great dusky shoulders he drove the dagger into the baron's fat body. Dion's high thin squeal broke in a strangled gurgle and his whole flabby frame collapsed like melted butter. A fool to the end, he died in mad terror, not knowing why. Flinging aside the crumpled corpse, already forgetful of it, Thoth grasped the ring in both hands, his dark eyes blazing with a fearful avidness.____'My Ring!' he whispered in terrible exultation. 'My power!'____How long he crouched over the baleful thing, motionless as a statue, drinking the evil aura of it into his dark soul, not even the Stygian knew. When he shook himself from his revery and drew back his mind from the nighted abysses where it had been questing, the moon was rising, casting long shadows across the smooth marble back of the garden-seat, at the foot of which sprawled the darker shadow which had

been the lord of Attalus. 'No more, Ascalante, no more!' whispered the Stygian, and his eyes burned red as a vampire's in the gloom. Stooping, he cupped a handful of congealing blood from the sluggish pool in which his victim sprawled, and rubbed it in the copper serpent's eyes until the yellow sparks were covered by a crimson mask.____'Blind your eyes, mystic serpent,' he chanted in a blood-freezing whisper. 'Blind your eyes to the moonlight and open them on darker gulfs! What do you see, oh serpent of Set. Whom do you call from the gulfs of the Night. Whose shadow falls on the waning Light? Call him to me, oh serpent of Set!'

____Stroking the scales with a peculiar circular motion of his fingers a motion which always carried the fingers back to their starting place, his voice sank still lower as he whispered dark names and grisly incantations forgotten the world over save in the grim hinterlands of dark Stygia, where monstrous shapes move in the dusk of the tombs.____There was a movement in the air about him, such a swirl as is made in water when some creature rises to the surface. A nameless, freezing wind blew on him briefly, as if from an opened Door. Thoth felt a presence at his back, but he did not look about. He kept his eyes fixed on the moonlit space of marble, on which a tenuous shadow hovered. As he continued his whispered incantations, this shadow grew in size and clarity, until it stood out distinct and horrific. Its outline was not unlike that of a gigantic baboon, but no such baboon ever walked the earth, not even in Stygia. Still Thoth did not look, but drawing from his girdle a sandal of his master - always carried in the dim hope that he might be able to put it to such use - he cast it behind him.____'Know it well, slave of the Ring!' he exclaimed. 'Find him who wore it and destroy him! Look into his eyes and blast his soul, before you tear out his throat! Kill him! Aye,' in a blind burst of passion, 'and all with him!'

____Etched on the moonlit wall Thoth saw the horror lower its misshapen head and take the scent like some hideous hound. Then the grisly head was thrown back and the thing wheeled and was gone like a wind through the trees. The Stygian flung up his arms in maddened exultation, and his teeth and eyes gleamed in the moonlight.____A soldier on guard without the walls yelled in startled horror as a great loping black shadow with flaming eyes cleared the wall and swept by him with a swirling rush of wind. But it was gone so swiftly that the bewildered warrior was left wondering whether it had been a dream or a hallucination._____4_____

When the world was young and men were weak,____and the fiends of the night walked free,____I strove with Set by fire and steel and the juice of the upas-tree;____Now that I sleep in the mount's black heart, and the ages take their toll, ____Forget ye him who fought with the Snake to save the human soul?_____

Alone in the great sleeping-chamber with its high golden dome King Conan slumbered and dreamed. Through swirling gray mists he heard a curious call, faint and far, and though he did not understand it, it seemed not within his power to ignore it. Sword in hand he went through the gray mist, as a man might walk through clouds, and the voice grew more distinct as he proceeded until he understood the word it spoke - it was his own name that was being called across the gulfs of Space or Time.____Now the mists grew lighter and he saw that he was in a great dark corridor that seemed to be cut in solid black stone. It was unlighted, but by some magic he could see plainly. The floor, ceiling and walls were highly polished and gleamed dully, and they were carved with the figures of ancient heroes and half-forgotten gods. He shuddered to see the vast shadowy outlines of the Nameless Old Ones, and he knew somehow that mortal feet had not traversed the corridor for centuries.____He came upon a wide star carved in the solid rock, and the

sides of the shaft were adorned with esoteric symbols so ancient and horrific that King Conan's skin crawled. The steps were carved each with the abhorrent figure of the Old Serpent, Set, so that at each step he planted his heel on the head of the Snake, as it was intended from old times. But he was none the less at ease for all that.____But the voice called him on, and at last, in darkness that would have been impenetrable to his material eyes, he came into a strange crypt, and saw a vague white-bearded figure sitting on a tomb. Conan's hair rose up and he grasped his sword, but the figure spoke in sepulchral tones. 'Oh man, do you know me?' 'Not I, by Crom!' swore the king. 'Man,' said the ancient, 'I am Epemitreus.' 'But Epemitreus the Sage has been dead for fifteen hundred years!' stammered Conan.____'Harken!' spoke the other commandingly. 'As a pebble cast into a dark lake sends ripples to the further shores, happenings in the Unseen World have broken like waves on my slumber. I have marked you well, Conan of Cimmeria, and the stamp of mighty happenings and great deeds is upon you. But dooms are loose in the land, against which your sword can not aid you.'____'You speak in riddles,' said Conan uneasily. 'Let me see my foe and I'll cleave his skull to the teeth.'____'Loose your barbarian fury against your foes of flesh and blood,' answered the ancient. 'It is not against men I must shield you. There are dark worlds barely guessed by man, wherein formless monsters stalk - fiends which may be drawn from the Outer Voids to take material shape and rend and devour at the bidding of evil magicians. There is a serpent in your house, oh king - an adder in your kingdom, come up from Stygia, with the dark wisdom of the shadows in his murky soul. As a sleeping man dreams of the serpent which crawls near him, I have felt the foul presence of Set's neophyte. He is drunk with terrible power, and the blows he strikes at his enemy may well bring down the kingdom. I have called you to me, to give you a weapon against him and his hell-hound pack.'____'But why?' bewilderedly asked Conan. 'Men say you sleep in the black heart of Golamira, whence you send forth your ghost on unseen wings to aid Aquilonia in times of need, but I - I am an outlander and a barbarian.'____'Peace!' the ghostly tones reverberated through the great shadowy cavern. 'Your destiny is one with Aquilonia. Gigantic happenings are forming in the web and the womb of Fate, and a blood-mad sorcerer shall not stand in the path of imperial destiny. Ages ago Set coiled about the world like a python about its prey. All my life, which was as the lives of three common men, I fought him. I drove him into the shadows of the mysterious south, but in dark Stygia men still worship him who to us is the arch-demon. As I fought Set, I fight his worshippers and his votaries and his acolytes. Hold out your sword.'____Wondering, Conan did so, and on the great blade, close to the heavy silver guard, the ancient traced with a bony finger a strange symbol that glowed like white fire in the shadows. And on the instant crypt, tomb and ancient vanished, and Conan, bewildered, sprang from his couch in the great golden-domed chamber. And as he stood, bewildered at the strangeness of his dream, he realized that he was gripping his sword in his hand. And his hair prickled at the nape of his neck, for on the broad blade was carved a symbol - the outline of a phoenix. And he remembered that on the tomb in the crypt he had seen what he had thought to be a similar figure, carved of stone. Now he wondered if it had been but a stone figure, and his skin crawled at the strangeness of it all.____Then as he stood, a stealthy sound in the corridor outside brought him to life, and without stopping to investigate, he began to don his armor; again he was the barbarian, suspicious and alert as a gray wolf at bay._____5_____What do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the

craft and the lie? ___I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky. ___The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing; ___Rush in and die, dogs - I was a man before I was a king. ___The Road of Kings ___Through the silence which shrouded the corridor of the royal palace stole twenty furtive figures. Their stealthy feet, bare or cased in soft leather, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed red on dagger, sword and keen-edged ax. ___'Easy all!' hissed Ascalante. 'Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night-guard has removed most of the sentries from these halls and made the rest drunk, but we must be careful, just the same. Back! Here comes the guard!' ___They crowded back behind a cluster of carven pillars, and almost immediately ten giants in black armor swung by at a measured pace. Their faces showed doubt as they glanced at the officer who was leading them away from their post of duty. This officer was rather pale; as the guard passed the hiding-places of the conspirators, he was seen to wipe the sweat from his brow with a shaky hand. He was young, and this betrayal of a king did not come easy to him. He mentally cursed the vainglorious extravagance which had put him in debt to the moneylenders and made him a pawn of scheming politicians. ___The guardsmen clanked by and disappeared up the corridor. ___'Good!' grinned Ascalante. 'Conan sleeps unguarded. Haste! If they catch us killing him, we're undone - but few men will espouse the cause of a dead king.' ___'Aye, haste!' cried Rinaldo, his blue eyes matching the gleam of the sword he swung above his head. 'My blade is thirsty! I hear the gathering of the vultures! On!' ___They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a gilded door which bore the royal dragon symbol of Aquilonia. ___'Gromel!' snapped Ascalante. 'Break me this door open!' ___The giant drew a deep breath and launched his mighty frame against the panels, which groaned and bent at the impact. Again he crouched and plunged. With a snapping of bolts and a rending crash of wood, the door splintered and burst inward. ___'In!' roared Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of the deed. ___'In!' yelled Rinaldo. 'Death to the tyrant!' ___They stopped short. Conan faced them, not a naked man roused mazed and unarmed out of a deep sleep to be butchered like a sheep, but a barbarian wide-awake and at bay, partly armored, and with his long sword in his hand. ___For an instant the tableau held - the four rebel noblemen in the broken door, and the horde of wild hairy faces crowding behind them - all held momentarily frozen by the sight of the blazing-eyed giant standing sword in hand in the middle of the candle-lighted chamber. In that instant Ascalante beheld, on a small table near the royal couch, the silver scepter and the slender gold circlet which was the crown of Aquilonia, and the sight maddened him with desire. ___'In rogues!' yelled the outlaw. 'He is one to twenty and he has no helmet!' ___True; there had been lack of time to don the heavy plumed casque, or to lace in place the side-plates of the cuirass, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from the wall. Still, Conan was better protected than any of his foes except Volmana and Gromel, who were in full armor. ___The king glared, puzzled as to their identity. Ascalante he did not know; he could not see through the closed vizors of the armored conspirators, and Rinaldo had pulled his slouch cap down above his eyes. But there was no time for surmise. With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room, Gromel first. He came like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. Conan sprang to meet him, and all his tigerish strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed

through the air and crashed on the Bossonian's helmet. Blade and casque shivered together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor. Conan bounded back, still gripping the broken hilt.____'Gromel!' he spat, his eyes blazing in amazement, as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head; then the rest of the pack were upon him. A dagger point raked along his ribs between breastplate and backplate, a sword-edge flashed before his eyes. He flung aside the dagger-wielder with his left arm, and smashed his broken hilt like a cestus into the swordsman's temple. The man's brains spattered in his face.____'Watch the door, five of you!' screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of the singing steel whirlpool, for he feared that Conan might smash through their midst and escape. The rogues drew back momentarily, as their leader seized several and thrust them toward the single door, and in that brief respite Conan leaped to the wall and tore therefrom an ancient battle-ax which, untouched by time, had hung there for half a century.____With his back to the wall he faced the closing ring for a flashing instant, then leaped into the thick of them. He was no defensive fighter; even in the teeth of overwhelming odds he always carried the war to the enemy. Any other man would have already died there, and Conan himself did not hope to survive, but he did ferociously wish to inflict as much damage as he could before he fell. His barbaric soul was ablaze, and the chants of old heroes were singing in his ears.____As he sprang from the wall his ax dropped an outlaw with a severed shoulder, and the terrible back-hand return crushed the skull of another. Swords whined venomously about him, but death passed him by breathless margins. The Cimmerian moved in a blur of blinding speed. He was like a tiger among baboons as he leaped, side-stepped and spun, offering an ever-moving target, while his ax wove a shining wheel of death about him.____For a brief space the assassins crowded him fiercely, raining blows blindly and hampered by their own numbers; then they gave back suddenly - two corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the king's fury, though Conan himself was bleeding from wounds on arm, neck and legs.____'Knaves!' screamed Rinaldo, dashing off his feathered cap, his wild eyes glaring. 'Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!'____He rushed in, hacking madly, but Conan, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a short terrific chop and with a powerful push of his open hand sent him reeling to the floor. The king took Ascalante's point in his left arm, and the outlaw barely saved his life by ducking and springing backward from the swinging ax. Again the wolves swirled in and Conan's ax sang and crushed. A hairy rascal stooped beneath its stroke and dived at the king's legs, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, glanced up in time to see the ax falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades lifted a broadsword with both hands and hewed through the king's left shoulder-plate, wounding the shoulder beneath. In an instant Conan's cuirass was full of blood.____Volmana, flinging the attackers right and left in his savage impatience, came plowing through and hacked murderously at Conan's unprotected head. The king ducked deeply and the sword shaved off a lock of his black hair as it whistled above him. Conan pivoted on his heel and struck in from the side. The ax crunched through the steel cuirass and Volmana crumpled with his whole left side caved in.____'Volmana!' gasped Conan breathlessly. 'I'll know that dwarf in Hell?'____He straightened to meet the maddened rush of Rinaldo, who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Conan leaped back, lifting his ax.____'Rinaldo!' his voice was strident with desperate urgency. 'Back! I would not slay you?____'Die, tyrant!'

screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Conan delayed the blow he was loth to deliver, until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of the steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation. ___Rinaldo dropped with his skull shattered, and Conan reeled back against the wall, blood spurting from between the fingers which gripped his wound. ___'In, now, and slay him!' yelled Ascalante. ___Conan put his back against the wall and lifted his ax. He stood like an image of the unconquerable primordial - legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one hand clutching the wall for support, the other gripping the ax on high, with the great corded muscles standing out in iron ridges, and his features frozen in a death snarl of fury - his eyes blazing terribly through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men faltered - wild, criminal and dissolute though they were, yet they came of a breed men called civilized, with a civilized background; here was the barbarian - the natural killer. They shrank back -the dying tiger could still deal death. ___Conan sensed their uncertainty and grinned mirthlessly and ferociously. ___'Who dies first?' he mumbled through smashed and bloody lips. ___Ascalante leaped like a wolf, halted almost in midair with incredible quickness and fell prostrate to avoid the death which was hissing toward him. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear as Conan recovered from his missed blow and struck again. This time the ax sank inches deep into the polished floor close to Ascalante's revolving legs. ___Another misguided desperado chose this instant to charge, followed half-heartedly by his fellows. He intended killing Conan before the Cimmerian could wrench his ax from the floor, but his judgment was faulty. The red ax lurched up and crashed down and a crimson caricature of a man catapulted back against the legs of the attackers. ___At that instant a fearful scream burst from the rogues at the door as a black misshapen shadow fell across the wall. All but Ascalante wheeled at the cry, and then, howling like dogs, they burst blindly through the door in a raving, blaspheming mob, and scattered through the corridors in screaming flight. ___Ascalante did not look toward the door; he had eyes only for the wounded king. He supposed the noise of the fray had at last roused the palace, and that the loyal guards were upon him, though even in that moment it seemed strange that his hardened rogues should scream so terribly in their flight. Conan did not look toward the door because he was watching the outlaw with the burning eyes of a dying wolf. In this extremity Ascalante's cynical philosophy did not desert him. ___'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 to be known; for, leaving the sentence uncompleted, he ran lightly at Conan just as the Cimmerian was perforce employing his ax-arm to wipe the blood from his blind eyes. ___But even as he began his charge, there was a strange rushing in the air and a heavy weight struck terrifically between his shoulders. He was dashed headlong and great talons sank agonizingly in his flesh. Writhing desperately beneath his attacker, he twisted his head about and stared into the face of Nightmare and lunacy. Upon him crouched a great black thing which he knew was born in no sane or human world. Its slavering black fangs were near his throat and the glare of its yellow eyes shriveled his limbs as a killing wind shrivels young corn. ___The hideousness of its face transcended mere bestiality. It might have been the face of an ancient, evil mummy, quickened with demoniac life. In those abhorrent features the outlaw's dilated eyes seemed to see, like a shadow in the madness that enveloped him, a faint and terrible resemblance to the slave Thoth-Amon. Then

Ascalante's cynical and all-sufficient philosophy deserted him, and with a ghastly cry he gave up the ghost before those slavering fangs touched him.____Conan, shaking the blood-drops from his eyes, stared frozen. At first he thought it was a great black hound which stood above Ascalante's distorted body; then as his sight cleared he saw that it was neither a hound nor a baboon.____With a cry that was like an echo of Ascalante's death-shriek, he reeled away from the wall and met the leaping horror with a cast of his ax that had behind it all the desperate power of his electrified nerves. The flying weapon glanced singing from the slanting skull it should have crushed, and the king was hurled halfway across the chamber by the impact of the giant body.____The slavering jaws closed on the arm Conan flung up to guard his throat, but the monster made no effort to secure a death-grip. Over his mangled arm it glared fiendishly into the king's eyes, in which there began to be mirrored a likeness of the horror which stared from the dead eyes of Ascalante. Conan felt his soul shrivel and begin to be drawn out of his body, to drown in the yellow wells of cosmic horror which glimmered spectrally in the formless chaos that was growing about him and engulfing all life and sanity. Those eyes grew and became gigantic, and in them the Cimmerian glimpsed the reality of all the abysmal and blasphemous horrors that lurk in the outer darkness of formless voids and nighted gulfs. He opened his bloody lips to shriek his hate and loathing, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat.____But the horror that paralysed and destroyed Ascalante roused in the Cimmerian a frenzied fury akin to madness. With a volcanic wrench of his whole body he plunged backward, heedless of the agony of his torn arm, dragging the monster bodily with him. And his out-flung hand struck something his dazed fighting-brain recognized as the hilt of his broken sword. Instinctively he gripped it and struck with all the power of nerve and thw, as a man stabs with a dagger. The broken blade sank deep and Conan's arm was released as the abhorrent mouth gaped as in agony. The king was hurled violently aside, and lifting himself on one hand he saw, as one mazed, the terrible convulsions of the monster from which thick blood was gushing through the great wound his broken blade had torn. And as he watched, its struggles ceased and it lay jerking spasmodically, staring upward with its grisly dead eyes. Conan blinked and shook the blood from his own eyes; it seemed to him that the thing was melting and disintegrating into a slimy unstable mass.____Then a medley of voices reached his ears, and the room was thronged with the finally roused people of the court - knights, peers, ladies, men-at-arms, councillors - all babbling and shouting and getting in one another's way. The Black Dragons were on hand, wild with rage, swearing and ruffling, with their hands on their hilts and foreign oaths in their teeth. Of the young officer of the door-guard nothing was seen, nor was he found then or later, though earnestly sought after.____'Gromel! Volmana! Rinaldo!' exclaimed Publius, the high councillor, wringing his fat hands among the corpses. 'Black treachery! Some one shall dance for this! Call the guard.'____'The guard is here, you old fool!' cavalierly snapped Pallan-tides, commander of the Black Dragons, forgetting Publius' rank in the stress of the moment. 'Best stop your caterwauling and aid us to bind the king's wounds. He's like to bleed to death.'____'Yes, yes!' cried Publius, who was a man of plans rather than action. 'We must bind his wounds. Send for every leech of the court! Oh, my lord, what a black shame on the city! Are you entirely slain?'____'Wine!' gasped the king from the couch where they had lain him. They put a goblet to his bloody lips and he drank like a man half dead of thirst.____'Good!' he grunted, falling back. 'Slaying

is cursed dry work.'___They had staunched the flow of blood, and the innate vitality of the barbarian was asserting itself.___'See first to the dagger-wound in my side,' he bade the court physicians. 'Rinaldo wrote me a deathly song there, and keen was the stylus.'___'We should have hanged him long ago,' gibbered Publius. 'No good can come of poets - who is this?'___He nervously touched Ascalante's body with his sandalled toe.___'By Mitra!' ejaculated the commander. 'It is Ascalante, once count of Thune! What devil's work brought him up from his desert haunts?'___'But why does he stare so?' whispered Publius, drawing away, his own eyes wide and a peculiar prickling among the short hairs at the back of his fat neck. The others fell silent as they gazed at the dead outlaw.___'Had you seen what he and I saw,' growled the king, sitting up despite the protests of the leeches, 'you had not wondered. Blast your own gaze by looking at?' He stopped short, his mouth gaping, his finger pointing fruitlessly. Where the monster had died, only the bare floor met his eyes.___'Crom!' he swore. 'The thing's melted back into the foulness which bore it!'___'The king is delirious,' whispered a noble. Conan heard and swore, with barbaric oaths.___'By Badb, Morrigan, Macha and Nemain!' he concluded wrathfully. 'I am sane! It was like a cross between a Stygian mummy and a baboon. It came through the door, and Ascalante's rogues fled before it. It slew Ascalante, who was about to run me through. Then it came upon me and I slew it - how I know not, for my ax glanced from it as from a rock. But I think that the Sage Epemitreus had a hand in it?'___'Hark how he names Epemitreus, dead for fifteen hundred years!' they whispered to each other.___'By Ymir!' thundered the king. 'This night I talked with Epemitreus! He called to me in my dreams, and I walked down a black stone corridor carved with old gods, to a stone stair on the steps of which were the outlines of Set, until I came to a crypt, and a tomb with a phoenix carved on it?'___'In Mitra's name, lord king, be silent!' It was the high-priest of Mitra who cried out, and his countenance was ashen.___Conan threw up his head like a lion tossing back its mane, and his voice was thick with the growl of the angry lion. 'Am I slave, to shut my mouth at your command?' 'Nay, nay, my lord!' The high-priest was trembling, but not through fear of the royal wrath. 'I meant no offense.' He bent his head close to the king and spoke in a whisper that carried only to Conan's ears.___'My lord, this is a matter beyond human understanding. Only the inner circle of the priestcraft know of the black stone corridor carved in the black heart of Mount Golamira, by unknown hands, or of the phoenix-guarded tomb where Epemitreus was laid to rest fifteen hundred years ago. And since that time no living man has entered it, for his chosen priests, after placing the Sage in the crypt, blocked up the outer entrance of the corridor so that no man could find it, and today not even the high-priests know where it is. Only by word of mouth, handed down by the high-priests to the chosen few, and jealously guarded, does the inner circle of Mitra's acolytes know of the resting-place of Epemitreus in the black heart of Golamira. It is one of the Mysteries, on which Mitra's cult stands.'___'I can not say by what magic Epemitreus brought me to him,' answered Conan. 'But I talked with him, and he made a mark on my sword. Why that mark made it deadly to demons, or what magic lay behind the mark, I know not; but though the blade broke on Gromel's helmet, yet the fragment was long enough to kill the horror.'___'Let me see your sword,' whispered the high-priest from a throat gone suddenly dry.___Conan held out the broken weapon and the high-priest cried out and fell to his knees.___'Mitra guard us against the powers of darkness!' he gasped. 'The king has indeed talked with Epemitreus this

night! And there on the sword - it is the secret sign none might make but him - the emblem of the immortal phoenix which broods for ever over his tomb! A candle, quick! Look again at the spot where the king said the goblin died!'___It lay in the shade of a broken screen. They threw the screen aside and bathed the floor in a flood of candle-light. And a shuddering silence fell over the people as they looked. Then some fell on their knees calling on Mitra, and some fled screaming from the chamber.____There on the floor where the monster had died, there lay, like a tangible shadow, a broad dark stain that could not be washed out; the thing had left its outline clearly etched in its blood, and that outline was of no being of a sane and normal world. Grim and horrific it brooded there, like the shadow cast by one of the apish gods that squat on the shadowy altars of dim temples in the dark land of Stygia._____THE SCARLET CITADEL_____They trapped the Lion on Shamu's plain; ___They weighted his limbs with an iron chain; ___They cried aloud in the trumpet-blast, ___They cried, 'The Lion is caged at last!' ___Woe to the cities of river and plain ___If ever the Lion stalks again!___Old Ballad_____1___The roar of the battle had died away; the shout of victory mingled with the cries of the dying. Like gay-hued leaves after an autumn storm, the fallen littered the plain; the sinking sun shimmered on burnished helmets, gilt-worked mail, silver breastplates, broken swords, and the heavy regal folds of silken standards, overthrown in pools of curdling crimson. In silent heaps lay war-horses and their steel-clad riders, flowing manes and blowing plumes stained alike in the red tide. About them and among them, like the drift of a storm, were strewn slashed and trampled bodies in steel caps and leather jerkins - archers and pikemen.____The oliphants sounded a fanfare of triumph all over the plain, and the hoofs of the victors crunched in the breasts of the vanquished as all the straggling, shining lines converged inward like the spokes of a glittering wheel, to the spot where the last survivor still waged unequal strife.____That day Conan, king of Aquilonia, had seen the pick of his chivalry cut to pieces, smashed and hammered to bits, and swept into eternity. With five thousand knights he had crossed the southeastern border of Aquilonia and ridden into the grassy meadowlands of Ophir, to find his former ally, King Amalrus of Ophir, drawn up against him with the hosts of Strabonus, king of Koth. Too late he had seen the trap. All that a man might do he had done with his five thousand cavalrymen against the thirty thousand knights, archers and spearmen of the conspirators.____Without bowmen or infantry, he had hurled his armored horsemen against the oncoming host, had seen the knights of his foes in their shining mail go down before his lances, had torn the opposing center to bits, driving the riven ranks headlong before him, only to find himself caught in a vise as the untouched wings closed in. Strabonus' Shemitish bowmen had wrought havoc among his knights, feathering them with shafts that found every crevice in their armor, shooting down the horses, the Kothian pikemen rushing in to spear the fallen riders. The mailed lancers of the routed center had re-formed, reinforced by the riders from the wings, and had charged again and again, sweeping the field by sheer weight of numbers.____The Aquilonians had not fled; they had died on the field, and of the five thousand knights who had followed Conan southward, not one left the plain of Shamu alive. And now the king himself stood at bay among the slashed bodies of his house-troops, his back against a heap of dead horses and men. Ophi-rean knights in gilded mail leaped their horses over mounds of corpses to slash at the solitary figure; squat Shemites with blue-black beards, and dark-faced Kothian knights ringed him on

foot. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly; the blackmailed figure of the western king loomed among his swarming foes, dealing blows like a butcher wielding a great cleaver. Riderless horses raced down the field; about his iron-clad feet grew a ring of mangled corpses. His attackers drew back from his desperate savagery, panting and livid.____Now through the yelling, cursing lines rode the lords of the conquerors - Strabonus, with his broad dark face and crafty eyes; Amalrus, slender, fastidious, treacherous, dangerous as a cobra; and the lean vulture Tsotha-lanti, clad only in silken robes, his great black eyes glittering from a face that was like that of a bird of prey. Of this Kothian wizard dark tales were told; tousle-headed women in northern and western villages frightened children with his name, and rebellious slaves were brought to abased submission quicker than by the lash, with the threat of being sold to him. Men said that he had a whole library of dark works bound in skin flayed from living human victims, and that in nameless pits below the hill whereon his palace sat, he trafficked with the powers of darkness, trading screaming girl slaves for unholy secrets. He was the real ruler of Koth.____Now he grinned bleakly as the kings reined back a safe distance from the grim iron-clad figure looming among the dead. Before the savage blue eyes blazing murderously from beneath the crested, dented helmet, the boldest shrank. Conan's dark scarred face was darker yet with passion; his black armor was hacked to tatters and splashed with blood; his great sword red to the cross-piece. In this stress all the veneer of civilization had faded; it was a barbarian who faced his conquerors. Conan was a Cimmerian by birth, one of those fierce moody hillmen who dwelt in their gloomy, cloudy land in the north. His saga, which had led him to the throne of Aquilonia, was the basis of a whole cycle of hero-tales.____So now the kings kept their distance, and Strabonus called on his Shemitish archers to loose their arrows at his foe from a distance; his captains had fallen like ripe grain before the Cimmerian's broadsword, and Strabonus, penurious of his knights as of his coins, was frothing with fury. But Tsotha shook his head.____'Take him alive.'____'Easy to say!' snarled Strabonus, uneasy lest in some way the blackmailed giant might hew a path to them through the spears.____'Who can take a man-eating tiger alive? By Ishtar, his heel is on the necks of my finest swordsmen! It took seven years and stacks of gold to train each, and there they lie, so much kite's meat. Arrows, I say!'____'Again, nay!' snapped Tsotha, swinging down from his horse.____He laughed coldly. 'Have you not learned by this time that my brain is mightier than my sword?'____He passed through the lines of the pikemen, and the giants in their steel caps and mail brigandines shrank back fearfully, lest they so much as touch the skirts of his robe. Nor were the plumed knights slower in making room for him. He stepped over the corpses and came face to face with the grim king. The hosts watched in tense silence, holding their breath. The black-armored figure loomed in terrible menace over the lean, silk-robed shape, the notched, dripping sword hovering on high.____'I offer you life, Conan,' said Tsotha, a cruel mirth bubbling at the back of his voice.____'I give you death, wizard,' snarled the king, and backed by iron muscles and ferocious hate the great sword swung in a stroke meant to shear Tsotha's lean torso in half. But even as the host cried out, the wizard stepped in, too quick for the eye to follow, and apparently merely laid an open hand on Conan's left forearm, from the rigid muscles of which the mail had been hacked away. The whistling blade veered from its arc and the mailed giant crashed heavily to earth, to lie motionless. Tsotha laughed silently.____'Take him up and fear not; the lion's fangs

are drawn.'___The kings reined in and gazed in awe at the fallen lion. Conan lay stiffly, like a dead man, but his eyes glared up at them, wide open, and blazing with helpless fury.'___'What have you done to him?' asked Amalrus uneasily.'___Tsotha displayed a broad ring of curious design on his finger. He pressed his fingers together and on the inner side of the ring a tiny steel fang darted out like a snake's tongue.'___'It is steeped in the juice of the purple lotus which grows in the ghost-haunted swamps of southern Stygia,' said the magician. 'Its touch produces temporary paralysis. Put him in chains and lay him in a chariot. The sun sets and it is time we were on the road for Khorshemish.'___Strabonus turned to his general Arbanus.'___'We return to Khorshemish with the wounded. Only a troop of the royal cavalry will accompany us. Your orders are to march at dawn to the Aquilonian border, and invest the city of Sammar. The Ophireans will supply you with food along the march. We will rejoin you as soon as possible, with reinforcements.'___So the host, with its steel-sheathed knights, its pikemen and archers and camp-servants, went into camp in the meadowlands near the battlefield. And through the starry night the two kings and the sorcerer who was greater than any king rode to the capital of Strabonus, in the midst of the glittering palace troop, and accompanied by a long line of chariots, loaded with the wounded. In one of these chariots lay Conan, king of Aquilonia, weighted with chains, the tang of defeat in his mouth, the blind fury of a trapped tiger in his soul.'___The poison which had frozen his mighty limbs to helplessness had not paralysed his brain. As the chariot in which he lay rumbled over the meadowlands, his mind revolved maddeningly about his defeat. Amalrus had sent an emissary imploring aid against Strabonus, who, he said, was ravaging his western domain, which lay like a tapering wedge between the border of Aquilonia and the vast southern kingdom of Koth. He asked only a thousand horsemen and the presence of Conan, to hearten his demoralized subjects. Conan now blasphemed mentally. In his generosity he had come with five times the number the treacherous monarch had asked. In good faith he had ridden into Ophir, and had been confronted by the supposed rivals allied against him. It spoke significantly of his prowess that they had brought up a whole host to trap him and his five thousand. A red cloud veiled his vision; his veins swelled with fury and in his temples a pulse throbbed maddeningly. In all his life he had never known greater and more helpless wrath. In swift-moving scenes the pageant of his life passed fleetingly before his mental eye - a panorama wherein moved shadowy figures which were himself, in many guises and conditions - a skin-clad barbarian; a mercenary swordsman in horned helmet and scale-mail corselet; a corsair in a dragon-prowed galley that trailed a crimson wake of blood and pillage along southern coasts; a captain of hosts in burnished steel, on a rearing black charger; a king on a golden throne with the lion banner flowing above, and throngs of gay-hued courtiers and ladies on their knees. But always the jouncing and rumbling of the chariot brought his thoughts back to revolve with maddening monotony about the treachery of Amalrus and the sorcery of Tsotha. The veins nearly burst in his temples and the cries of the wounded in the chariots filled him with ferocious satisfaction.'___Before midnight they crossed the Ophirean border and at dawn the spires of Khorshemish stood up gleaming and rose-tinted on the southeastern horizon, the slim towers overawed by the grim scarlet citadel that at a distance was like a splash of bright blood in the sky. That was the castle of Tsotha. Only one narrow street, paved with marble and guarded by heavy iron gates, led up to it, where it crowned

the hill dominating the city. The sides of that hill were too sheer to be climbed elsewhere. From the walls of the citadel one could look down on the broad white streets of the city, on minaretted mosques, shops, temples, mansions, and markets. One could look down, too, on the palaces of the king, set in broad gardens, high-walled, luxurious riots of fruit trees and blossoms, through which artificial streams murmured, and silvery fountains rippled incessantly. Over all brooded the citadel, like a condor stooping above its prey, intent on its own dark meditations. The mighty gates between the huge towers of the outer wall clanged open, and the king rode into his capital between lines of glittering spearmen, while fifty trumpets pealed salute. But no throngs swarmed the white-paved streets to fling roses before the conqueror's hoofs. Strabonus had raced ahead of news of the battle, and the people, just rousing to the occupations of the day, gaped to see their king returning with a small retinue, and were in doubt as to whether it portended victory or defeat. Conan, life sluggishly moving in his veins again, craned his neck from the chariot floor to view the wonders of this city which men called the Queen of the South. He had thought to ride some day through these golden-chased gates at the head of his steel-clad squadrons, with the great lion banner flowing over his helmeted head. Instead he entered in chains, stripped of his armor, and thrown like a captive slave on the bronze floor of his conqueror's chariot. A wayward devilish mirth of mockery rose above his fury, but to the nervous soldiers who drove the chariot his laughter sounded like the muttering of a rousing lion. 2 Gleaming shell of an outworn lie; fable of Right divine ? You gained your crowns by heritage, but Blood was the price of mine. The throne that I won by blood and sweat, by Crom, I will not sell For promise of valleys filled with gold, or threat of the Halls of Hell! The Road of Kings In the citadel, in a chamber with a domed ceiling of carven jet, and the fretted arches of doorways glimmering with strange dark jewels, a strange conclave came to pass. Conan of Aquilonia, blood from unbandaged wounds caking his huge limbs, faced his captors. On either side of him stood a dozen black giants, grasping their long-shafted axes. In front of him stood Tsotha, and on divans lounged Strabonus and Amalrus in their silks and gold, gleaming with jewels, naked slave-boys beside them pouring wine into cups carved of a single sapphire. In strong contrast stood Conan, grim, blood-stained, naked but for a loin-cloth, shackles on his mighty limbs, his blue eyes blazing beneath the tangled black mane that fell over his low broad forehead. He dominated the scene, turning to tinsel the pomp of the conquerors by the sheer vitality of his elemental personality, and the kings in their pride and splendor were aware of it each in his secret heart, and were not at ease. Only Tsotha was not disturbed. 'Our desires are quickly spoken, king of Aquilonia,' said Tsotha. 'It is our wish to extend our empire.' 'And so you want to swine my kingdom,' rasped Conan. 'What are you but an adventurer, seizing a crown to which you had no more claim than any other wandering barbarian?' parried Amalrus. 'We are prepared to offer you suitable compensation?' 'Compensation?' It was a gust of deep laughter from Conan's mighty chest. 'The price of infamy and treachery! I am a barbarian, so I shall sell my kingdom and its people for life and your filthy gold? Ha! How did you come to your crown, you and that black-faced pig beside you? Your fathers did the fighting and the suffering, and handed their crowns to you on golden platters. What you inherited without lifting a finger -except to poison a few brothers - I fought for. 'You sit on satin and guzzle wine the people sweat for, and talk

of divine rights of sovereignty - bah! I climbed out of the abyss of naked barbarism to the throne and in that climb I spilt my blood as freely as I spilt that of others. If either of us has the right to rule men, by Crom, it is I! How have you proved yourself my superior?___'I found Aquilonia in the grip of a pig like you - one who traced his genealogy for a thousand years. The land was torn with the wars of the barons, and the people cried out under suppression and taxation. Today no Aquilonian noble dares maltreat the humblest of my subjects, and the taxes of the people are lighter than anywhere else in the world.___'What of you? Your brother, Amalrus, holds the eastern half of your kingdom and defies you. And you, Strabonus, your soldiers are even now besieging castles of a dozen or more rebellious barons. The people of both your kingdoms are crushed into the earth by tyrannous taxes and levies. And you would loot mine - ha! Free my hands and I'll varnish this floor with your brains!___Tsotha grinned bleakly to see the rage of his kingly companions.___'All this, truthful though it be, is beside the point. Our plans are no concern of yours. Your responsibility is at an end when you sign this parchment, which is an abdication in favor of Prince Arpello of Pellia. We will give you arms and horse, and five thousand golden lunas, and escort you to the eastern frontiers.'___'Setting me adrift where I was when I rode into Aquilonia to take service in her armies, except with the added burden of a traitor's name!' Conan's laugh was like the deep short bark of a timber wolf. 'Arpello, eh? I've had suspicions of that butcher of Pellia. Can you not even steal and pillage frankly and honestly, but you must have an excuse, however thin? Arpello claims a trace of royal blood; so you use him as an excuse for theft, and a satrap to rule through! I'll see you in hell first.'___'You're a fool!' exclaimed Amalrus. 'You are in our hands, and we can take both crown and life at our pleasure!___Conan's answer was neither kingly nor dignified, but characteristically instinctive in the man, whose barbaric nature had never been submerged in his adopted culture. He spat full in Amalrus' eyes. The king of Ophir leaped up with a scream of outraged fury, groping for his slender sword. Drawing it, he rushed at the Cimmerian, but Tsotha intervened. 'Wait, your majesty; this man is my prisoner.'___'Aside, wizard!' shrieked Amalrus, maddened by the glare in the Cimmerian's blue eyes.___'Back, I say!' roared Tsotha, roused to awesome wrath. His lean hand came from his sleeve and cast a shower of dust into the Ophirean's contorted face. Amalrus cried out and staggered back, clutching at his eyes, the sword falling from his hand. He dropped limply on the divan, while the Kothian guards looked on stolidly and King Strabonus hurriedly gulped another goblet of wine, holding it with hands that trembled. Amalrus lowered his hands and shook his head violently, intelligence slowly sifting back into his gray eyes.___'I went blind,' he growled. 'What did you do to me, wizard?' ___'Merely a gesture to convince you who was the real master,' snapped Tsotha, the mask of his formal pretense dropped, revealing the naked evil personality of the man. 'Strabonus has learned his lesson - let you learn yours. It was but a dust I found in a Stygian tomb which I flung into your eyes - if I brush out their sight again, I will leave you to grope in darkness for the rest of your life.'___Amalrus shrugged his shoulders, smiled whimsically and reached for a goblet, dissembling his fear and fury. A polished diplomat, he was quick to regain his poise. Tsotha turned to Conan, who had stood imperturbably during the episode. At the wizard's gesture, the blacks laid hold of their prisoner and marched him behind Tsotha, who led the way out of the chamber through an arched doorway into a winding corridor, whose floor

was of many-hued mosaics, whose walls were inlaid with gold tissue and silver chasing, and from whose fretted arched ceiling swung golden censers, filling the corridor with dreamy perfumed clouds. They turned down a smaller corridor, done in jet and black jade, gloomy and awful, which ended at a brass door, over whose arch a human skull grinned horrifically. At this door stood a fat repellent figure, dangling a bunch of keys ? Tsotha's chief eunuch, Shukeli, of whom grisly tales were whispered - a man with whom a bestial lust for torture took the place of normal human passions. ___The brass door let onto a narrow stair that seemed to wind down into the very bowels of the hill on which the citadel stood. Down these stairs went the band, to halt at last at an iron door, the strength of which seemed unnecessary. Evidently it did not open on outer air, yet it was built as if to withstand the battering of mangonels and rams. Shukeli opened it, and as he swung back the ponderous portal, Conan noted the evident uneasiness among the black giants who guarded him; nor did Shukeli seem altogether devoid of nervousness as he peered into the darkness beyond. Inside the great door there was a second barrier, composed of great steel bars. It was fastened by an ingenious bolt which had no lock and could be worked only from the outside; this bolt shot back, the grille slid into the wall. They passed through, into a broad corridor, the floor, walls and arched ceiling of which seemed to be cut out of solid stone. Conan knew he was far underground, even below the hill itself. The darkness pressed in on the guardsmen's torches like a sentient, animate thing. ___They made the king fast to a ring in the stone wall. Above his head in a niche in the wall they placed a torch, so that he stood in a dim semicircle of light. The blacks were anxious to be gone; they muttered among themselves, and cast fearful glances at the darkness. Tsotha motioned them out, and they filed through the door in stumbling haste, as if fearing the darkness might take tangible form and spring upon their backs. Tsotha turned toward Conan, and the king noticed uneasily that the wizard's eyes shone in the semi-darkness, and that his teeth much resembled the fangs of a wolf, gleaming whitely in the shadows. ___'And so, farewell, barbarian,' mocked the sorcerer. 'I must ride to Shamar, and the siege. In ten days I will be in your palace in Tamar, with my warriors. What word from you shall I say to your women, before I flay their dainty skins for scrolls whereon to chronicle the triumphs of Tsotha-lanti?' ___Conan answered with a searing Cimmerian curse that would have burst the very eardrums of an ordinary man, and Tsotha laughed thinly and withdrew. Conan had a glimpse of his vulture-like figure through the thick-set bars, as he slid home the grate; then the heavy outer door clanged, and silence fell like a pall. _____3_____The Lion strode through the halls of Hell; ___Across his path grim shadows fell ___Of many a mowing, nameless shape? ___Monsters with dripping jaws agape. ___The darkness shuddered with scream and yell ___When the Lion stalked through the halls of Hell. ___Old Ballad_____King Conan tested the ring in the wall and the chain that bound him. His limbs were free, but he knew that his shackles were beyond even his iron strength. The links of the chain were as thick as his thumb and were fastened to a band of steel about his waist, a band broad as his hand and half an inch thick. The sheer weight of his shackles would have slain a lesser man with exhaustion. The locks that held band and chain were massive affairs that a sledge-hammer could hardly have dented. As for the ring, evidently it went clear through the wall and was clinched on the other side. ___Conan cursed and panic surged through him as he glared into the darkness that pressed against the half-circle of light. All the superstitious dread

of the barbarian slept in his soul, untouched by civilized logic. His primitive imagination peopled the subterranean darkness with grisly shapes. Besides, his reason told him that he had not been placed there merely for confinement. His captors had no reason to spare him. He had been placed in these pits for a definite doom. He cursed himself for his refusal of their offer, even while his stubborn manhood revolted at the thought, and he knew that were he taken forth and given another chance, his reply would be the same. He would not sell his subjects to the butcher. And yet it had been with no thought of any one's gain but his own that he had seized the kingdom originally. Thus subtly does the instinct of sovereign responsibility enter even a red-handed plunderer sometimes. Conan thought of Tsotha's last abominable threat, and groaned in sick fury, knowing it was no idle boast. Men and women were to the wizard no more than the writhing insect is to the scientist. Soft white hands that had caressed him, red lips that had been pressed to his, dainty white bosoms that had quivered to his hot fierce kisses, to be stripped of their delicate skin, white as ivory and pink as young petals - from Conan's lips burst a yell so frightful and inhuman in its mad fury that a listener would have started in horror to know that it came from a human throat. The shuddering echoes made him start and brought back his own situation vividly to the king. He glared fearsomely at the outer gloom, and thought of all the grisly tales he had heard of Tsotha's necromantic cruelty, and it was with an icy sensation down his spine that he realized that these must be the very Halls of Horror named in shuddering legendry, the tunnels and dungeons wherein Tsotha performed horrible experiments with beings human, bestial, and, it was whispered, demoniac, tampering blasphemously with the naked basic elements of life itself. Rumor said that the mad poet Rinaldo had visited these pits, and been shown horrors by the wizard, and that the nameless monstrosities of which he hinted in his awful poem, The Song of the Pit, were no mere fantasies of a disordered brain. That brain had crashed to dust beneath Conan's battle-ax on the night the king had fought for his life with the assassins the mad rimer had led into the betrayed palace, but the shuddersome words of that grisly song still rang in the king's ears as he stood there in his chains. Even with the thought the Cimmerian was frozen by a soft rustling sound, blood-freezing in its implication. He tensed in an attitude of listening, painful in its intensity. An icy hand stroked his spine. It was the unmistakable sound of pliant scales slithering softly over stone. Cold sweat beaded his skin, as beyond the ring of dim light he saw a vague and colossal form, awful even in its indistinctness. It reared upright, swaying slightly, and yellow eyes burned icily on him from the shadows. Slowly a huge, hideous, wedge-shaped head took form before his dilated eyes, and from the darkness oozed, in flowing scaly coils, the ultimate horror of reptilian development. It was a snake that dwarfed all Conan's previous ideas of snakes. Eighty feet it stretched from its pointed tail to its triangular head, which was bigger than that of a horse. In the dim light its scales glistened coldly, white as hoar-frost. Surely this reptile was one born and grown in darkness, yet its eyes were full of evil and sure sight. It looped its titan coils in front of the captive, and the great head on the arching neck swayed a matter of inches from his face. Its forked tongue almost brushed his lips as it darted in and out, and its fetid odor made his senses reel with nausea. The great yellow eyes burned into his, and Conan gave back the glare of a trapped wolf. He fought frenziedly against the mad impulse to grasp the great arching neck in his tearing hands. Strong beyond the comprehension of

civilized man, he had broken the neck of a python in a fiendish battle on the Stygian coast, in his corsair days. But this reptile was venomous; he saw the great fangs, a foot long, curved like scimitars. From them dripped a colorless liquid that he instinctively knew was death. He might conceivably crush that wedge-shaped skull with a desperate clenched fist, but he knew that at his first hint of movement, the monster would strike like lightning.____It was not because of any logical reasoning process that Conan remained motionless, since reason might have told him - since he was doomed anyway - to goad the snake into striking and get it over with; it was the blind black instinct of self-preservation that held him rigid as a statue blasted out of iron. Now the great barrel reared up and the head was poised high above his own, as the monster investigated the torch. A drop of venom fell on his naked thigh, and the feel of it was like a white-hot dagger driven into his flesh. Red jets of agony shot through Conan's brain, yet he held himself immovable; not by the twitching of a muscle or the flicker of any eyelash did he betray the pain of the hurt that left a scar he bore to the day of his death.____The serpent swayed over him, as if seeking to ascertain whether there were in truth life in this figure which stood so death-like still. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the outer door, all but invisible in the shadows, clanged stridently. The serpent, suspicious as all its kind, whipped about with a quickness incredible for its bulk, and vanished with a long-drawn slithering down the corridor. The door swung open and remained open. The grille was withdrawn and a huge dark figure was framed in the glow of torches outside. The figure glided in, pulling the grille partly to behind it, leaving the bolt poised. As it moved into the light of the torch over Conan's head, the king saw that it was a gigantic black man, stark naked, bearing in one hand a huge sword and in the other a bunch of keys. The black spoke in a sea-coast dialect, and Conan replied; he had learned the jargon while a corsair on the coasts of Kush.____'Long have I wished to meet you, Amra,' the black gave Conan the name by which the Cimmerian had been known to the Kushites in his piratical days - Amra, the Lion. The slave's woolly skull split in an animal-like grin, showing white tusks, but his eyes glinted redly in the torchlight. 'I have dared much for this meeting. Look! The keys to your chains! I stole them from Shukeli. What will you give me for them?'____He dangled the keys in front of Conan's eyes.____'Ten thousand golden lunas,' answered the king quickly, new hope surging fiercely in his breast.____'Not enough!' cried the black, a ferocious exultation shining on his ebon countenance. 'Not enough for the risks I take. Tsotha's pets might come out of the dark and eat me, and if Shukeli finds out I stole his keys, he'll hang me up by my? well, what will you give me?'____'Fifteen thousand lunas and a palace in Poitain,' offered the king.____The black yelled and stamped in a frenzy of barbaric gratification.____'More!' he cried. 'Offer me more! What will you give me?'____'You black dog!' a red mist of fury swept across Conan's eyes. 'Were I free I'd give you a broken back! Did Shukeli send you here to mock me?'____'Shukeli knows nothing of my coming, white man,' answered the black, craning his thick neck to peer into Conan's savage eyes. 'I know you from of old, since the days when I was a chief among a free people, before the Stygians took me and sold me into the north. Do you not remember the sack of Abombi, when your sea-wolves swarmed in? Before the palace of King Ajaga you slew a chief and a chief fled from you. It was my brother who died; it was I who fled. I demand of you a blood-price, Amra!'____'Free me and I'll pay you your weight in gold pieces,' growled Conan.____The red eyes glittered, the white teeth

flashed wolfishly in the torchlight.____'Aye, you white dog, you are like all your race; but to a black man gold can never pay for blood. The price I ask is - your head!'____The word was a maniacal shriek that sent the echoes shivering. Conan tensed, unconsciously straining against his shackles in his abhorrence of dying like a sheep; then he was frozen by a great horror. Over the black's shoulder he saw a vague horrific form swaying in the darkness.____'Tsotha will never know!' laughed the black fiendishly, too engrossed in his gloating triumph to take heed of anything else, too drunk with hate to know that Death swayed behind his shoulder. 'He will not come into the vaults until the demons have torn your bones from their chains. I will have your head, Amra!'____He braced his knotted legs like ebon columns and swung up the massive sword in both hands, his great black muscles rolling and cracking in the torchlight. And at that instant the titanic shadow behind him darted down and out, and the wedge-shaped head smote with an impact that re-echoed down the tunnels. Not a sound came from the thick blubbery lips that flew wide in fleeting agony. With the thud of the stroke, Conan saw the life go out of the wide black eyes with the suddenness of a candle blown out. The blow knocked the great black body clear across the corridor, and horribly the gigantic sinuous shape whipped around it in glistening coils that hid it from view, and the snap and splintering of bones came plainly to Conan's ears. Then something made his heart leap madly. The sword and the keys had flown from the black's hands to crash and jangle on the stone - and the keys lay almost at the king's feet.____He tried to bend to them, but the chain was too short; almost suffocated by the mad pounding of his heart, he slipped one foot from its sandal, and gripped them with his toes; drawing his foot up, he grasped them fiercely, barely stifling the yell of ferocious exultation that rose instinctively to his lips.____An instant's fumbling with the huge locks and he was free. He caught up the fallen sword and glared about. Only empty darkness met his eyes, into which the serpent had dragged a mangled, tattered object that only faintly resembled a human body. Conan turned to the open door. A few quick strides brought him to the threshold - a squeal of high-pitched laughter shrilled through the vaults, and the grille shot home under his very fingers, the bolt crashed down. Through the bars peered a face like a fiendishly mocking carved gargoyle - Shukeli the eunuch, who had followed his stolen keys. Surely he did not, in his gloating, see the sword in the prisoner's hand. With a terrible curse Conan struck as a cobra strikes; the great blade hissed between the bars and Shukeli's laughter broke in a death-scream. The fat eunuch bent at the middle, as if bowing to his killer, and crumpled like tallow, his pudgy hands clutching vainly at his spilling entrails.____Conan snarled in satisfaction; but he was still a prisoner. His keys were futile against the bolt which could be worked only from the outside. His experienced touch told him the bars were hard as the sword; an attempt to hew his way to freedom would only splinter his one weapon. Yet he found dents on those adamant bars, like the marks of incredible fangs, and wondered with an involuntary shudder what nameless monsters had assailed the barriers so terribly. Regardless, there was but one thing for him to do, and that was to seek some other outlet. Taking the torch from the niche, he set off down the corridor, sword in hand. He saw no sign of the serpent or its victim, only a great smear of blood on the stone floor.____Darkness stalked on noiseless feet about him, scarcely driven back by his flickering torch. On either hand he saw dark openings, but he kept to the main corridor, watching the floor ahead of him carefully, lest he fall into some pit.

And suddenly he heard the sound of a woman, weeping piteously. Another of Tsotha's victims, he thought, cursing the wizard anew, and turning aside, followed the sound down a smaller tunnel, dank and damp. The weeping grew nearer as he advanced and lifting his torch, he made out a vague shape in the shadows. Stepping closer, he halted in sudden horror at the anthropomorphic bulk which sprawled before him. Its unstable outlines somewhat suggested an octopus, but its malformed tentacles were too short for its size, and its substance was a quaking, jelly-like stuff which made him physically sick to look at. From among this loathsome gelid mass reared up a frog-like head, and he was frozen with nauseated horror to realize that the sound of weeping was coming from those obscene blubbery lips. The noise changed to an abominable high-pitched tittering as the great unstable eyes of the monstrosity rested on him, and it hitched its quaking bulk toward him. He backed away and fled up the tunnel, not trusting his sword. The creature might be composed of terrestrial matter, but it shook his very soul to look upon it, and he doubted the power of man-made weapons to harm it. For a short distance he heard it flopping and floundering after him, screaming with horrible laughter. The unmistakably human note in its mirth almost staggered his reason. It was exactly such laughter as he had heard bubble obscenely from the fat lips of the salacious women of Shadizar, City of Wickedness, when captive girls were stripped naked on the public auction block. By what hellish arts had Tsotha brought this unnatural being into life? Conan felt vaguely that he had looked on blasphemy against the eternal laws of nature. He ran toward the main corridor, but before he reached it he crossed a sort of small square chamber, where two tunnels crossed. As he reached this chamber, he was flashingly aware of some small squat bulk on the floor ahead of him; then before he could check his flight or swerve aside, his foot struck something yielding that squalled shrilly, and he was precipitated headlong, the torch flying from his hand and being extinguished as it struck the stone floor. Half stunned by his fall, Conan rose and groped in the darkness. His sense of direction was confused, and he was unable to decide in which direction lay the main corridor. He did not look for the torch, as he had no means of rekindling it. His groping hands found the openings of the tunnels, and he chose one at random. How long he traversed it in utter darkness, he never knew, but suddenly his barbarian's instinct of near peril halted him short. He had the same feeling he had had when standing on the brink of great precipices in the darkness. Dropping to all fours, he edged forward, and presently his outflung hand encountered the edge of a well, into which the tunnel floor apparently dropped abruptly. As far down as he could reach the sides fell away sheerly, dank and slimy to his touch. He stretched out an arm in the darkness and could barely touch the opposite edge with the point of his sword. He could leap across it then, but there was no point in that. He had taken the wrong tunnel and the main corridor lay somewhere behind him. Even as he thought this, he felt a faint movement of air; a shadowy wind, rising from the well, stirred his black mane. Conan's skin crawled. He tried to tell himself that this well connected somehow with the outer world, but his instincts told him it was a thing unnatural. He was not merely inside the hill; he was below it, far below the level of the city streets. How then could an outer wind find its way into the pits and blow up from below? A faint throbbing pulsed on that ghostly wind, like drums beating far, far below. A strong shudder shook the king of Aquilonia. He rose to his feet and backed away, and as he did something floated up out of the well. What it was, Conan did not know. He could see nothing in the

darkness, but he distinctly felt a presence - an invisible, intangible intelligence which hovered malignly near him. Turning, he fled the way he had come. Far ahead he saw a tiny red spark. He headed for it, and long before he thought to have reached it, he caromed headlong into a solid wall and saw the spark at his feet. It was his torch, the flame extinguished, but the end a glowing coal. Carefully he took it up and blew upon it, fanning it into flame again. He gave a sigh as the tiny blaze leaped up. He was back in the chamber where the tunnels crossed, and his sense of direction came back.____He located the tunnel by which he had left the main corridor, and even as he started toward it, his torch-flame flickered wildly as if blown upon by unseen lips. Again he felt a presence, and he lifted his torch, glaring about.____He saw nothing; yet he sensed, somehow, an invisible, bodiless thing that hovered in the air, dripping slimily and mouthing obscenities that he could not hear but was in some instinctive way aware of. He swung viciously with his sword and it felt as if he were cleaving cobwebs. A cold horror shook him then, and he fled down the tunnel, feeling a foul burning breath on his naked back as he ran.____But when he came out into the broad corridor, he was no longer aware of any presence, visible or invisible. Down it he went, momentarily expecting fanged and taloned fiends to leap at him from the darkness. The tunnels were not silent. From the bowels of the earth in all directions came sounds that did not belong in a sane world. There were titterings, squeals of demoniac mirth, long shuddering howls, and once the unmistakable squalling laughter of a hyena ended awfully in human words of shrieking blasphemy. He heard the pad of stealthy feet, and in the mouths of the tunnels caught glimpses of shadowy forms, monstrous and abnormal in outline.____It was as if he had wandered into hell - a hell of Tsotharlanti's making. But the shadowy things did not come into the corridor, though he distinctly heard the greedy sucking-in of slavering lips, and felt the burning glare of hungry eyes. And presently he knew why. A slithering sound behind him electrified him, and he leaped to the darkness of a near-by tunnel, shaking out his torch. Down the corridor he heard the great serpent crawling, sluggish from its recent grisly meal. From his very side something whimpered in fear and shrunk away in the darkness. Evidently the main corridor was the great snake's hunting-ground, and the other monsters gave it room.____To Conan the serpent was the least horror of them; he almost felt a kinship with it when he remembered the weeping, tittering obscenity, and the dripping, mouthing thing that came out of the well. At least it was of earthly matter; it was a crawling death, but it threatened only physical extinction, whereas these other horrors menaced mind and soul as well.____After it had passed on down the corridor, he followed, at what he hoped was a safe distance, blowing his torch into flame again. He had not gone far when he heard a low moan that seemed to emanate from the black entrance of a tunnel near by. Caution warned him off, but curiosity drove him to the tunnel, holding high the torch that was now little more than a stump. He was braced for the sight of anything, yet what he saw was what he had least expected. He was looking into a broad cell, and a space of this was caged off with closely set bars extending from floor to ceiling, set firmly in the stone. Within these bars lay a figure, which, as he approached, he saw was either a man, or the exact likeness of a man, twined and bound about with the tendrils of a thick vine which seemed to grow through the solid stone of the floor. It was covered with strangely pointed leaves and crimson blossoms - not the satiny red of natural petals, but a livid, unnatural crimson, like a perversity of flower-life. Its clinging, pliant branches wound about

the man's naked body and limbs, seeming to caress his shrinking flesh with lustful avid kisses. One great blossom hovered exactly over his mouth. A low bestial moaning drooled from the loose lips; the head rolled as if in unbearable agony, and the eyes looked full at Conan. But there was no light of intelligence in them; they were blank, glassy, the eyes of an idiot.____Now the great crimson blossom dipped and pressed its petals over the writhing lips. The limbs of the wretch twisted in anguish; the tendrils of the plant quivered as if in ecstasy, vibrating their full snaky lengths. Waves of changing hues surged over them; their color grew deeper, more venomous.____Conan did not understand what he saw, but he knew that he looked on Horror of some kind. Man or demon, the suffering of the captive touched Conan's wayward and impulsive heart. He sought for entrance and found a grille-like door in the bars, fastened with a heavy lock, for which he found a key among the keys he carried, and entered. Instantly the petals of the livid blossoms spread like the hood of a cobra, the tendrils reared menacingly and the whole plant shook and swayed toward him. Here was no blind growth of natural vegetation. Conan sensed a strange, malignant intelligence; the plant could see him, and he felt its hate emanate from it in almost tangible waves. Stepping warily nearer, he marked the root-stem, a repulsively supple stalk thicker than his thigh, and even as the long tendrils arched toward him with a rattle of leaves and hiss, he swung his sword and cut through the stem with a single stroke.____Instantly the wretch in its clutches was thrown violently aside as the great vine lashed and knotted like a beheaded serpent, rolling into a huge irregular ball. The tendrils thrashed and writhed, the leaves shook and rattled like castanets, and petals opened and closed convulsively; then the whole length straightened out limply, the vivid colors paled and dimmed, a reeking white liquid oozed from the severed stump.____Conan stared, spellbound; then a sound brought him round, sword lifted. The freed man was on his feet, surveying him. Conan gaped in wonder. No longer were the eyes in the worn face expressionless. Dark and meditative, they were alive with intelligence, and the expression of imbecility had dropped from the face like a mask. The head was narrow and well-formed, with a high splendid forehead. The whole build of the man was aristocratic, evident no less in his tall slender frame than in his small trim feet and hands. His first words were strange and startling.____'What year is this?' he asked, speaking in Kothian.____'Today is the tenth of the month Yuluk, of the year of the Gazelle,' answered Conan.____'Yagkoolan Ishtar!' murmured the stranger. 'Ten years!' he drew a hand across his brow, shaking his head as if to clear his brain from cobwebs. 'All is dim yet. After a ten-year emptiness, the mind can not be expected to begin functioning clearly at once. Who are you?'____'Conan, once of Cimmeria. Now king of Aquilonia.'____The other's eyes showed surprise.____'Indeed? And Namedides?'____'I strangled him on his throne the night I took the royal city,' answered Conan.____A certain naivete in the king's reply twitched the stranger's lips.____'Pardon, your majesty. I should have thanked you for the service you have done me. I am like a man woken suddenly from sleep deeper than death and shot with nightmares of agony more fierce than hell, but I understand that you delivered me. Tell me - why did you cut the stem of the plant Yothga instead of tearing it up by the roots?'____'Because I learned long ago to avoid touching with my flesh that which I do not understand,' answered the Cimmerian.____'Well for you,' said the stranger. 'Had you been able to tear it up, you might have found things clinging to the roots against which not even your sword would prevail. Yothga's roots are set in hell.'____'But who are

you?' demanded Conan. ___'Men call me Pelias.' ___'What!' cried the king. 'Pelias the sorcerer, Tsotha-lanti's rival, who vanished from the earth ten years ago?' ___'Not entirely from the earth,' answered Pelias with a wry smile. 'Tsotha preferred to keep me alive, in shackles more grim than rusted iron. He pent me in here with this devil flower whose seeds drifted down through the black cosmos from Yag the Accursed, and found fertile field only in the maggot-writhing corruption that seethes on the floors of hell. ___'I could not remember my sorcery and the words and symbols of my power, with that cursed thing gripping me and drinking my soul with its loathsome caresses. It sucked the contents of my mind day and night, leaving my brain as empty as a broken wine-jug. Ten years! Ishtar preserve us!' ___Conan found no reply, but stood holding the stump of the torch, and trailing his great sword. Surely the man was mad - yet there was no madness in the strange dark eyes that rested so calmly on him. ___'Tell me, is the black wizard in Khorshemish? But no - you need not reply. My powers begin to wake, and I sense in your mind a great battle and a king trapped by treachery. And I see Tsotha-lanti riding hard for the Tybor with Strabonus and the king of Ophir. So much the better. My art is too frail from the long slumber to face Tsotha yet. I need time to recruit my strength, to assemble my powers. Let us go forth from these pits.' ___Conan jangled his keys discouragedly. ___'The grille to the outer door is made fast by a bolt which can only be worked from outside. Is there no other exit from these tunnels?' ___'Only one which neither of us would care to use, seeing that it goes down and not up,' laughed Pelias. 'But no matter. Let us see to the grille.' ___He moved toward the corridor with uncertain steps, as of long-unused limbs, which gradually became more sure. As he followed, Conan said uneasily, 'There is a cursed big snake creeping about this tunnel. Let us be wary lest we step into his mouth.' ___'I remember him of old,' answered Pelias grimly, 'the more as I was forced to watch while ten of my acolytes were fed to him. He is Satha, the Old One, chiefest of Tsotha's pets.' ___'Did Tsotha dig these pits for no other reason than to house his cursed monstrosities?' asked Conan. ___'He did not dig them. When the city was founded three thousand years ago there were ruins of an earlier city on and about this hill. King Khossus V, the founder, built his palace on the hill, and digging cellars beneath it, came upon a walled-up doorway, which he broke into and discovered the pits, which were about as we see them now. But his grand vizier came to such a grisly end in them that Khossus in a fright walled up the entrance again. He said the vizier fell into a well - but he had the cellars filled in, and later abandoned the palace itself, and built himself another in the suburbs, from which he fled in panic on discovering some black mold scattered on the marble floor of his chamber one morning. ___'He then departed with his whole court to the eastern corner of the kingdom and built a new city. The palace on the hill was not used and fell into ruins. When Akkutho I revived the lost glories of Khorshemish, he built a fortress there. It remained for Tsotha-lanti to rear the scarlet citadel and open the way to the pits again. Whatever fate overtook the grand vizier of Khossus, Tsotha avoided it. He fell into no well, though he did descend into a well he found, and came out with a strange expression which has not since left his eyes. ___'I have seen that well, but I do not care to seek in it for wisdom. I am a sorcerer, and older than men reckon, but I am human. As for Tsotha - men say that a dancing-girl of Shadizar slept too near the pre-human ruins on Dagoth Hill and woke in the grip of a black demon; from that unholy ruin was spawned an accursed hybrid men call Tsotha-lanti?' ___Conan cried out sharply and recoiled, thrusting his companion

back. Before them rose the great shimmering white form of Satha, an ageless hate in its eyes. Conan tensed himself for one mad berserker onslaught - to thrust the glowing fagot into that fiendish countenance and throw his life into the ripping sword-stroke. But the snake was not looking at him. It was glaring over his shoulder at the man called Pelias, who stood with his arms folded, smiling. And in the great cold yellow eyes slowly the hate died out in a glitter of pure fear - the only time Conan ever saw such an expression in a reptile's eyes. With a swirling rush like the sweep of a strong wind, the great snake was gone. ___'What did he see to frighten him?' asked Conan, eyeing his companion uneasily. ___'The scaled people see what escapes the mortal eye,' answered Pelias cryptically. 'You see my fleshly guise; he saw my naked soul.' ___An icy trickle disturbed Conan's spine, and he wondered if, after all, Pelias were a man, or merely another demon of the pits in the mask of humanity. He contemplated the advisability of driving his sword through his companion's back without further hesitation. But while he pondered, they came to the steel grille, etched blackly in the torches beyond, and the body of Shukeli, still slumped against the bars in a curdled welter of crimson. ___Pelias laughed, and his laugh was not pleasant to hear. ___'By the ivory hips of Ishtar, who is our doorman? Lo, it is no less than the noble Shukeli himself, who hanged my young men by their feet and skinned them with squeals of laughter! Do you sleep, Shukeli? Why do you lie so stiffly, with your fat belly sunk in like a dressed pig's?' ___'He is dead,' muttered Conan, ill at ease to hear these wild words. ___'Dead or alive,' laughed Pelias, 'he shall open the door for us.' ___He clapped his hands sharply and cried, 'Rise, Shukeli! Rise from hell and rise from the bloody floor and open the door for your masters! Rise, I say!' ___An awful groan reverberated through the vaults. Conan's hair stood on end and he felt clammy sweat bead his hide. For the body of Shukeli stirred and moved, with infantile gropings of the fat hands. The laughter of Pelias was merciless as a flint hatchet, as the form of the eunuch reeled upright, clutching at the bars of the grille. Conan, glaring at him, felt his blood turn to ice, and the marrow of his bones to water; for Shukeli's wide-open eyes were glassy and empty, and from the great gash in his belly his entrails hung limply to the floor. The eunuch's feet stumbled among his entrails as he worked the bolt, moving like a brainless automaton. When he had first stirred, Conan had thought that by some incredible chance the eunuch was alive; but the man was dead - had been dead for hours. ___Pelias sauntered through the opened grille, and Conan crowded through behind him, sweat pouring from his body, shrinking away from the awful shape that slumped on sagging legs against the grate it held open. Pelias passed on without a backward glance, and Conan followed him, in the grip of nightmare and nausea. He had not taken half a dozen strides when a sodden thud brought him round. Shukeli's corpse lay limply at the foot of the grille. ___'His task is done, and hell gapes for him again,' remarked Pelias pleasantly, politely affecting not to notice the strong shudder which shook Conan's mighty frame. ___He led the way up the long stairs, and through the brass skull-crowned door at the top. Conan gripped his sword, expecting a rush of slaves, but silence gripped the citadel. They passed through the black corridor and came into that in which the censers swung, billowing forth their everlasting incense. Still they saw no one. ___'The slaves and soldiers are quartered in another part of the citadel,' remarked Pelias. 'Tonight, their master being away, they doubtless lie drunk on wine or lotus-juice.' ___Conan glanced through an arched, golden-silled window that let out upon a broad balcony, and

swore in surprise to see the dark-blue star-flecked sky. It had been shortly after sunrise when he was thrown into the pits. Now it was past midnight. He could scarcely realize he had been so long underground. He was suddenly aware of thirst and a ravenous appetite. Pelias led the way into a golden-domed chamber, floored with silver, its lapis-lazuli walls pierced by the fretted arches of many doors.____With a sigh Pelias sank onto a silken divan.____'Silks and gold again,' he sighed. 'Tsotha affects to be above the pleasures of the flesh, but he is half devil. I am human, despite my black arts. I love ease and good cheer - that's how Tsotha trapped me. He caught me helpless with drink. Wine is a curse - by the ivory bosom of Ishtar, even as I speak of it, the traitor is here! Friend, please pour me a goblet - hold! I forgot you are a king. I will pour.'____'The devil with that,' growled Conan, filling a crystal goblet and proffering it to Pelias. Then, lifting the jug, he drank deeply from the mouth, echoing Pelias' sigh of satisfaction.____'The dog knows good wine,' said Conan, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'But by Crom, Pelias, are we to sit here until his soldiers awake and cut our throats?'____'No fear,' answered Pelias. 'Would you like to see how fortune holds with Strabonus?'____Blue fire burned in Conan's eyes and he gripped his sword until his knuckles showed blue. 'Oh, to be at sword-points with him!' he rumbled.____Pelias lifted a great shimmering globe from an ebony table.____'Tsotha's crystal. A childish toy, but useful when there is lack of time for higher science. Look in, your majesty.'____He laid it on the table before Conan's eyes. The king looked into cloudy depths which deepened and expanded. Slowly images crystalized out of mist and shadows. He was looking on a familiar landscape. Broad plains ran to a wide winding river, beyond which the level lands ran up quickly into a maze of low hills. On the northern bank of the river stood a walled town, guarded by a moat connected at each end with the river.____'By Crom!' ejaculated Conan. 'It's Shamar! The dogs besiege it!'____The invaders had crossed the river; their pavilions stood in the narrow plain between the city and the hills. Their warriors swarmed about the walls, their mail gleaming palely under the moon. Arrows and stones rained on them from the towers and they staggered back, but came on again.____Even as Conan cursed, the scene changed. Tall spires and gleaming domes stood up in the mist, and he looked on his own capital of Tamar, where all was confusion. He saw the steel-clad knights of Poitain, his staunchest supporters, whom he had left in charge of the city, riding out of the gate, hooted and hissed by the multitude which swarmed the streets. He saw looting and rioting, and men-at-arms whose shields bore the insignia of Pellia, manning the towers and swaggering through the markets. Over all, like a fantasmal picture, he saw the dark, triumphant face of Prince Arpello of Pellia. The images faded.____'So!' cursed Conan, 'My people turn on me the moment my back is turned?'____'Not entirely,' broke in Pelias. 'They have heard that you are dead. There is no one to protect them from outer enemies and civil war, they think. Naturally, they turn to the strongest noble, to avoid the horrors of anarchy. They do not trust the Poitainians, remembering former wars. But Arpello is on hand, and the strongest prince of the central realm.'____'When I come to Aquilonia again he will be but a headless corpse rotting on Traitor's Common,' Conan ground his teeth.____'Yet before you can reach your capital,' reminded Pelias, 'Strabonus may be before you. At least his riders will be ravaging your kingdom.'____'True!' Conan paced the chamber like a caged lion. 'With the fastest horse I could not reach Shamar before midday. Even there I could do no good except to die with the people, when the town falls -

as fall it will in a few days at most. From Shamar to Tamar is five days' ride, even if you kill your horses on the road. Before I could reach my capital and raise an army, Strabonus would be hammering at the gates; because raising an army is going to be hell - all my damnable nobles will have scattered to their own cursed fiefs at the word of my death. And since the people have driven out Trocero of Poitain, there's none to keep Arpello's greedy hands off the crown - and the crown-treasure. He'll hand the country over to Strabonus, in return for a mock-throne - and as soon as Strabonus' back is turned, he'll stir up revolt. But the nobles won't support him, and it will only give Strabonus excuse for annexing the kingdom openly. Oh Crom, Ymir, and Set! If I had but wings to fly like lightning to Tamar!'___Pelias, who sat tapping the jade table-top with his fingernails, halted suddenly, and rose as with a definite purpose, beckoning Conan to follow. The king complied, sunk in moody thoughts, and Pelias led the way out of the chamber and up a flight of marble, gold-worked stairs that let out on the pinnacle of the citadel, the roof of the tallest tower. It was night, and a strong wind was blowing through the star-filled skies, stirring Conan's black mane. Far below them twinkled the lights of Khorshemish, seemingly farther away than the stars above them. Pelias seemed withdrawn and aloof here, one in cold unhuman greatness with the company of the stars.____'There are creatures,' said Pelias, 'not alone of earth and sea, but of air and the far reaches of the skies as well, dwelling apart, unguessed of men. Yet to him who holds the Master-words and Signs and the Knowledge underlying all, they are not malignant nor inaccessible. Watch, and fear not.'___He lifted his hands to the skies and sounded a long weird call that seemed to shudder endlessly out into space, dwindling and fading, yet never dying out, only receding farther and farther into some unreckoned cosmos. In the silence that followed, Conan heard a sudden beat of wings in the stars, and recoiled as a huge bat-like creature alighted beside him. He saw its great calm eyes regarding him in the starlight; he saw the forty-foot spread of its giant wings. And he saw it was neither bat nor bird.____'Mount and ride,' said Pelias. 'By dawn it will bring you to Tamar.'___'By Crom!' muttered Conan. 'Is this all a nightmre from which I shall presently awaken in my palace at Tamar? What of you? I would not leave you alone among your enemies.'___'Be at ease regarding me,' answered Pelias. 'At dawn the people of Khorshemish will know they have a new master. Doubt not what the gods have sent you. I will meet you in the plain by Shamar.'___Doubtfully Conan clambered upon the ridged back, gripping the arched neck, still convinced that he was in the grasp of a fantastic nightmare. With a great rush and thunder of titan wings, the creature took the air, and the king grew dizzy as he saw the lights of the city dwindle far below him._____4_____ 'The sword that slays the king cuts the cords of the empire.'___Aquilonian Proverb_____The streets of Tamar swarmed with howling mobs, shaking fists and rusty pikes. It was the hour before dawn of the second day after the battle of Shamar, and events had occurred so swiftly as to daze the mind. By means known only to Tsotha-lanti, word had reached Tamar of the king's death, within half a dozen hours after the battle. Chaos had resulted. The barons had deserted the royal capital, galloping away to secure their castles against marauding neighbors. The well-knit kingdom Conan had built up seemed tottering on the edge of dissolution, and commoners and merchants trembled at the imminence of a return of the feudalistic regime. The people howled for a king to protect them against their own aristocracy no less than foreign foes. Count Trocero, left by Conan in charge of the city, tried to reassure them, but in their unreasoning

terror, they remembered old civil wars, and how this same count had besieged Tamar fifteen years before. It was shouted in the streets that Trocero had betrayed the king; that he planned to plunder the city. The mercenaries began looting the quarters, dragging forth screaming merchants and terrified women. ___Trocero swept down on the looters, littered the streets with their corpses, drove them back into their quarter in confusion, and arrested their leaders. Still the people rushed wildly about, with brainless squawks, screaming that the count had incited the riot for his own purposes. ___Prince Arpello came before the distracted council and announced himself ready to take over the government of the city until a new king could be decided upon, Conan having no son. While they debated, his agents stole subtly among the people, who snatched at a shred of royalty. The council heard the storm outside the palace windows, where the multitude roared for Arpello the Rescuer. The council surrendered. ___Trocero at first refused the order to give up his baton of authority, but the people swarmed about him, hissing and howling, hurling stones and offal at his knights. Seeing the futility of a pitched battle in the streets with Arpello's retainers, under such conditions, Trocero hurled the baton in his rival's face, hanged the leaders of the mercenaries in the market-square as his last official act, and rode out of the southern gate at the head of his fifteen hundred steel-clad knights. The gates slammed behind him and Arpello's suave mask fell away to reveal the grim visage of the hungry wolf. ___With the mercenaries cut to pieces or hiding in their barracks, his were the only soldiers in Tamar. Sitting his war-horse in the great square, Arpello proclaimed himself king of Aquilonia, amid the clamor of the deluded multitude. ___Publius the Chancellor, who opposed this move, was thrown into prison. The merchants, who had greeted the proclamation of a king with relief, now found with consternation that the new monarch's first act was to levy a staggering tax on them. Six rich merchants, sent as a delegation of protest, were seized and their heads slashed off without ceremony. A shocked and stunned silence followed this execution. The merchants, as is the habit of merchants when confronted by a power they can not control with money, fell on their fat bellies and licked their oppressor's boots. ___The common people were not perturbed at the fate of the merchants, but they began to murmur when they found that the swaggering Pellian soldiery, pretending to maintain order, were as bad as Turanian bandits. Complaints of extortion, murder and rape poured in to Arpello, who had taken up his quarters in Publius' palace, because the desperate councillors, doomed by his order, were holding the royal palace against his soldiers. He had taken possession of the pleasure-palace, however, and Conan's girls were dragged to his quarters. The people muttered at the sight of the royal beauties writhing in the brutal hands of the iron-clad retainers - dark-eyed damsels of Poitain, slim black-haired wenches from Zamora, Zingara and Hyrkania, Brythunian girls with tousled yellow heads, all weeping with fright and shame, unused to brutality. ___Night fell on a city of bewilderment and turmoil, and before midnight word spread mysteriously in the street that the Kothi-ans had followed up their victory and were hammering at the walls of Shamar. Somebody in Tsotha's mysterious secret-service had babbled. Fear shook the people like an earthquake, and they did not even pause to wonder at the witchcraft by which the news had been so swiftly transmitted. They stormed at Arpello's doors, demanding that he march southward and drive the enemy back over the Tybor. He might have subtly pointed out. that his force was not sufficient, and that he could not raise an army until the barons recognized his claim to the

crown. But he was drunk with power, and laughed in their faces. A young student, Athemides, mounted a column in the market, and with burning words accused Arpello of being a cats-paw for Strabonus, painting a vivid picture of existence under Kothian rule, with Arpello as satrap. Before he finished, the multitude was screaming with fear and howling with rage. Arpello sent his soldiers to arrest the youth, but the people caught him up and fled with him, deluging the pursuing retainers with stones and dead cats. A volley of crossbow quarrels routed the mob, and a charge of horsemen littered the market with bodies, but Athemides was smuggled out of the city to plead with Trocero to retake Tamar, and march to aid Shamar. Athemides found Trocero breaking his camp outside the walls, ready to march to Poitain, in the far southwestern corner of the kingdom. To the youth's urgent pleas he answered that he had neither the force necessary to storm Tamar, even with the aid of the mob inside, nor to face Strabonus. Besides, avaricious nobles would plunder Poitain behind his back, while he was fighting the Kothians. With the king dead, each man must protect his own. He was riding to Poitain, there to defend it as best he might against Arpello and his foreign allies.____While Athemides pleaded with Trocero, the mob still raved in the city with helpless fury. Under the great tower beside the royal palace the people swirled and milled, screaming their hate at Arpello, who stood on the turrets and laughed down at them while his archers ranged the parapets, bolts drawn and fingers on the triggers of their arbalests.____The prince of Pellia was a broad-built man of medium height, with a dark stern face. He was an intriguer, but he was also a fighter. Under his silken jupon with its gilt-braided skirts and jagged sleeves, glimmered burnished steel. His long black hair was curled and scented, and bound back with a cloth-of-silver band, but at his hip hung a broadsword the jeweled hilt of which was worn with battles and campaigns.____'Fools! Howl as you will! Conan is dead and Arpello is king!'____What if all Aquilonia were leagued against him? He had men enough to hold the mighty walls until Strabonus came up. But Aquilonia was divided against itself. Already the barons were girding themselves each to seize his neighbor's treasure. Arpello had only the helpless mob to deal with. Strabonus would carve through the loose lines of the warring barons as a galley-ram through foam, and until his coming, Arpello had only to hold the royal capital.____'Fools! Arpello is king!'____The sun was rising over the eastern towers. Out of the crimson dawn came a flying speck that grew to a bat, then to an eagle. Then all who saw screamed in amazement, for over the walls of Tamar swooped a shape such as men knew only in half-forgotten legends, and from between its titan-wings sprang a human form as it roared over the great tower. Then with a deafening thunder of wings it was gone, and the folk blinked, wondering if they dreamed. But on the turret stood a wild barbaric figure, half naked, blood-stained, brandishing a great sword. And from the multitude rose a roar that rocked the very towers, 'The king! It is the king!'____Arpello stood transfixed; then with a cry he drew and leaped at Conan. With a lion-like roar the Cimmerian parried the whistling blade, then dropped his own sword, gripped the prince and heaved him high above his head by crotch and neck.____'Take your plots to hell with you!' he roared, and like a sack of salt, he hurled the prince of Pellia far out, to fall through empty space for a hundred and fifty feet. The people gave back as the body came hurtling down, to smash on the marble pave, spattering blood and brains, and lie crushed in its splintered armor, like a mangled beetle.____The archers on the tower shrank back, their nerve broken. They fled, and the beleaguered councilmen sallied from the palace and

hewed into them with joyous abandon. Pellian knights and men-at-arms sought safety in the streets and the crowd tore them to pieces. In the streets the fighting milled and eddied, plumed helmets and steel caps tossed among the tousled heads and then vanished; swords hacked madly in a heaving forest of pikes, and over all rose the roar of the mob, shouts of acclaim mingling with screams of blood-lust and howls of agony. And high above all, the naked figure of the king rocked and swayed on the dizzy battlements, mighty arms brandished, roaring with gargantuan laughter that mocked all mobs and princes, even himself. _____5_____A long bow and a strong bow, and let the sky grow dark! ___The cord to the nock, the shaft to the ear, and the king of Koth for a mark!___Song of the Bossonian Archers_____The midafternoon sun glinted on the placid waters of the Tybor, washing the southern bastions of Shamar. The haggard defenders knew that few of them would see that sun rise again. The pavilions of the besiegers dotted the plain. The people of Shamar had not been able successfully to dispute the crossing of the river, outnumbered as they were. Barges, chained together, made a bridge over which the invader poured his hordes. Strabonus had not dared march on into Aquilonia with Shamar, unsubdued, at his back. He had sent his light riders, his spahis, inland to ravage the country, and had reared up his siege engines in the plain. He had anchored a flotilla of boats, furnished him by Amalrus, in the middle of the stream, over against the river-wall. Some of these boats had been sunk by stones from the city's ballistas, which crashed through their decks and ripped out their planking, but the rest held their places and from their bows and mast-heads, protected by mantlets, archers raked the riverward turrets. These were Shemites, born with bows in their hands, not to be matched by Aquilonian bowmen.____On the landward side mangonels rained boulders and tree-trunks among the defenders, shattering through roofs and crushing humans like beetles; rams pounded incessantly at the stones; sappers burrowed like moles in the earth, sinking their mines beneath the towers. The moat had been dammed at the upper end, and emptied of its water, had been filled up with boulders, earth and dead horses and men. Under the walls the mailed figures swarmed, battering at the gates, rearing up scaling-ladders, pushing storming-towers, thronged with spearmen, against the turrets.____Hope had been abandoned in the city, where a bare fifteen hundred men resisted forty thousand warriors. No word had come from the kingdom whose outpost the city was. Conan was dead, so the invaders shouted exultantly. Only the strong walls and the desperate courage of the defenders had kept them so long at bay, and that could not suffice for ever. The western wall was a mass of rubbish on which the defenders stumbled in hand-to-hand conflict with the invaders. The other walls were buckling from the mines beneath them, the towers leaning drunkenly.____Now the attackers were massing for a storm. The oliphants sounded, the steel-clad ranks drew up on the plain. The storm-ing-towers, covered with raw bull-hides, rumbled forward. The people of Shamar saw the banners of Koth and Ophir, flying side by side, in the center, and made out, among their gleaming knights, the slim lethal figure of the golden-mailed Amalrus, and the squat black-armored form of Strabonus. And between them was a shape that made the bravest blench with horror - a lean vulture figure in a filmy robe. The pikemen moved forward, flowing over the ground like the glinting waves of a river of molten steel; the knights cantered forward, lances lifted, guidons streaming. The warriors on the wall drew a long breath, consigned their souls to Mitra, and gripped their notched and red-stained weapons.____Then without warning, a bugle-call

cut the din. A drum of hoofs rose above the rumble of the approaching host. North of the plain across which the army moved, rose ranges of low hills, mounting northward and westward like giant stair-steps. Now down out of these hills, like spume blown before a storm shot the spahis who had been laying waste the countryside, riding low and spurring hard, and behind them the sun shimmering on moving ranks of steel. They moved into full view, out of the deniers - mailed horsemen, the great lion banner of Aquilonia floating over them. From the electrified watchers on the towers a great shout rent the skies. In ecstasy warriors clashed their notched swords on their riven shields, and the people of the town, ragged beggars and rich merchants, harlots in red kirtles and dames in silks and satins, fell to their knees and cried out for joy to Mitra, tears of gratitude streaming down their faces. Strabonus, frantically shouting orders, with Arbanus, who would wheel around the ponderous lines to meet this unexpected menace, grunted, 'We still outnumber them, unless they have reserves hidden in the hills. The men on the battle-towers can mask any sorties from the city. These are Poitanians - we might have guessed Trocero would try some such mad gallantry.' Amalrus cried out in unbelief. 'I see Trocero and his captain Prospero - but ivbo rides between them?' 'Ishtar preserve us!' shrieked Strabonus, paling. 'It is King Conan!' 'You are mad!' squalled Tsotha, starting convulsively. 'Conan has been in Satha's belly for days!' He stopped short, glaring wildly at the host which was dropping down, file by file, into the plain. He could not mistake the giant figure in black, gild-worked armor on the great black stallion, riding beneath the billowing silken folds of the great banner. A scream of feline fury burst from Tsotha's lips, flecking his beard with foam. For the first time in his life, Strabonus saw the wizard completely upset, and shrank from the sight. 'Here is sorcery!' screamed Tsotha, clawing madly at his beard. 'How could he have escaped and reached his kingdom in time to return with an army so quickly? This is the work of Pelias, curse him! I feel his hand in this! May I be cursed for not killing him when I had the power!' The kings gaped at the mention of a man they believed ten years dead, and panic, emanating from the leaders, shook the host. All recognized the rider on the black stallion. Tsotha felt the superstitious dread of his men, and fury made a hellish mask of his face. 'Strike home!' he screamed, brandishing his lean arms madly. 'We are still the stronger! Charge and crush these dogs! We shall yet feast in the ruins of Shamar tonight! Oh Set!' he lifted his hands and invoked the serpent-god to even Strabonus' horror, 'grant us victory and I swear I will offer up to thee five hundred virgins of Shamar, writhing in their blood!' Meanwhile the opposing host had debouched onto the plain. With the knights came what seemed a second, irregular army on tough swift ponies. These dismounted and formed their ranks on foot - stolid Bossonian archers, and keen pikemen from Gunderland, their tawny locks blowing from under their steel caps. It was a motley army Conan had assembled, in the wild hours following his return to his capital. He had beaten the frothing mob away from the Pellian soldiers who held the outer walls of Tamar, and impressed them into his service. He had sent a swift rider after Trocero to bring him back. With these as nucleus of an army he had raced southward, sweeping the countryside for recruits and for mounts. Nobles of Tamar and the surrounding countryside had augmented his forces, and he had levied recruits from every village and castle along his road. Yet it was but a paltry force he had gathered to dash against the invading hosts, though of the quality of tempered steel. Nineteen hundred armored horsemen followed him, the main bulk

of which consisted of the Poitanian knights. The remnants of the mercenaries and professional soldiers in the trains of loyal noblemen made up his infantry - five thousand archers and four thousand pikemen. This host now came on in good order - first the archers, then the pikemen, behind them the knights, moving at a walk.____Over against them Arbanus ordered his lines, and the allied army moved forward like a shimmering ocean of steel. The watchers on the city walls shook to see that vast host, which overshadowed the powers of the rescuers. First marched the Shemitish archers, then the Kothian spearmen, then the mailed knights of Strabonus and Amalrus. Arbanus' intent was obvious - to employ his footmen to sweep away the infantry of Conan, and open the way for an overpowering charge of his heavy cavalry.____The Shemites opened fire at five hundred yards, and arrows flew like hail between the hosts, darkening the sun. The western archers, trained by a thousand years of merciless warfare with the Pictish savages, came stolidly on, closing their ranks as their comrades fell. They were far outnumbered, and the Shemitish bow had the longer range, but in accuracy the Bossonians were equal to their foes, and they balanced sheer skill in archery by superiority in morale, and in excellence of armor. Within good range they loosed, and the Shemites went down by whole ranks. The blue-bearded warriors in their light mail shirts could not endure punishment as could the heavier-armored Bossonians. They broke, throwing away their bows, and their flight disordered the ranks of the Kothian spearmen behind them.____Without the support of the archers, these men-at-arms fell by the hundreds before the shafts of the Bossonians, and charging in madly to close quarters, they were met by the spears of the pikemen. No infantry was a match for the wild Gunder-men, whose homeland, the northernmost province of Aquilonia was but a day's ride across the Bossonian marches from the borders of Cimmeria, and who, born and bred to battle, were the purest blood of all the Hyborian peoples. The Kothian spearmen, dazed by their losses from arrows, were cut to pieces and fell back in disorder.____Strabonus roared in fury as he saw his infantry repulsed, and shouted for a general charge. Arbanus demurred, pointing out the Bossonians reforming in good order before the Aquilonian knights, who had sat their steeds motionless during the melee. The general advised a temporary retirement, to draw the western knights out of the cover of the bows, but Strabonus was mad with rage. He looked at the long shimmering ranks of his knights, he glared at the handful of mailed figures over against him, and he commanded Arbanus to give the order to charge.____The general commended his soul to Ishtar and sounded the golden oliphant. With a thunderous roar the forest of lances dipped, and the great host rolled across the plain, gaining momentum as it came. The whole plain shook to the rumbling avalanche of hoofs, and the shimmer of gold and steel dazzled the watchers on the towers of Shamar.____The squadrons clave the loose ranks of the spearmen, riding down friend and foe alike, and rushed into the teeth of a blast of arrows from the Bossonians. Across the plain they thundered, grimly riding the storm that scattered their way with gleaming knights like autumn leaves. Another hundred paces and they would ride among the Bossonians and cut them down like corn; but flesh and blood could not endure the rain of death that now ripped and howled among them. Shoulder to shoulder, feet braced wide, stood the archers, drawing shaft to ear and loosing as one man, with deep short shouts.____The whole front rank of the knights melted away, and over the pin-cushioned corpses of horses and riders, their comrades stumbled and fell headlong. Arbanus was down, an arrow through his throat, his skull smashed by the hoofs of his dying war-

horse, and confusion ran through the disordered host. Strabonus was screaming an order, Amalrus another, and through all ran the superstitious dread the sight of Conan had awakened. ___And while the gleaming ranks milled in confusion, the trumpets of Conan sounded, and through the opening ranks of the archers crashed home the terrible charge of the Aquilonian knights. ___The hosts met with a shock like that of an earthquake, that shook the tottering towers of Shamar. The disordered squadrons of the invaders could not withstand the solid steel wedge, bristling with spears, that rushed like a thunder-bolt against them. The long lances of the attackers ripped their ranks to pieces, and into the heart of their host rode the knights of Poitain, swinging their terrible two-handed swords. ___The clash and clangor of steel was as that of a million sledges on as many anvils. The watchers on the walls were stunned and deafened by the thunder as they gripped the battlements and watched the steel maelstrom swirl and eddy, where plumes tossed high among the flashing swords, and standards dipped and reeled. ___Amalrus went down, dying beneath the trampling hoofs, his shoulder-bone hewn in twain by Prospero's two-handed sword. The invaders' numbers had engulfed the nineteen hundred knights of Conan, but about this compact wedge, which hewed deeper and deeper into the looser formation of their foes, the knights of Koth and Ophir swirled and smote in vain. They could not break the wedge. ___Archers and pikemen, having disposed of the Kothian infantry which was strewn in disorderly flight across the plain, came to the edges of the fight, loosing their arrows point-blank, running in to slash at girths and horses' bellies with their knives, thrusting upward to spit the riders on their long pikes. ___At the tip of the steel wedge Conan roared his heathen battle-cry and swung his great sword in glittering arcs of death that made naught of steel burganet or mail habergeon. Straight through a thundering waste of steel-sheathed foes he rode, and the knights of Koth closed in behind him, cutting him off from his warriors. As a thunderbolt strikes, Conan struck, hurtling through the ranks by sheer power and velocity, until he came to Strabonus, livid, among his palace troops. Now here the battle hung in balance, for with his superior numbers, Strabonus still had opportunity to pluck victory from the knees of the gods. ___But he screamed when he saw his arch-foe within arm's length at last, and lashed out wildly with his ax. It clanged on Conan's helmet, striking fire, and the Cimmerian reeled and struck back. The five-foot blade crushed Strabonus' casque and skull, and the king's charger reeled screaming, hurling a limp and sprawling corpse from the saddle. A great cry went up from the host, which faltered and gave back. Trocero and his house troops, hewing desperately, cut their way to Conan's side, and the great banner of Koth went down. Then behind the dazed and stricken invaders went up a mighty clamor and the blaze of a huge conflagration. The defenders of Shamar had made a desperate sortie, cut down the men masking the gates, and were raging among the tents of the besiegers, cutting down the camp followers, burning the pavilions, and destroying the siege engines. It was the last straw. The gleaming army melted away in flight and the furious conquerors cut them down as they ran. ___The fugitives raced for the river, but the men on the flotilla, harried sorely by the stones and shafts of the revived citizens, cast loose and pulled for the southern shore, leaving their comrades to their fate. Of these many gained the shore, racing across the barges that served as a bridge, until the men of Shamar cut these adrift and severed them from the shore. Then the fight became a slaughter. Driven into the river to drown in their armor, or hacked down along the bank, the invaders

perished by thousands. No quarter they had promised; no quarter they got.____From the foot of the low hills to the shores of the Tybor, the plain was littered with corpses, and the river whose tide ran red, floated thick with the dead. Of the nineteen hundred knights who had ridden south with Conan, scarcely five hundred lived to boast of their scars, and the slaughter among the archers and pikemen was ghastly. But the great shining host of Strabonus and Amalrus was hacked out of existence, and those that fled were less than those that died.____While the slaughter yet went on along the river, the final act of a grim drama was being played out in the meadowland beyond. Among those who had crossed the barge-bridge before it was destroyed was Tsotha, riding like the wind on a gaunt weird-looking steed whose stride no natural horse could match. Ruthlessly riding down friend and foe, he gained the southern bank, and then a glance backward showed him a grim figure on a great black stallion in mad pursuit. The lashings had already been cut, and the barges were drifting apart, but Conan came recklessly on, leaping his steed from boat to boat as a man might leap from one cake of floating ice to another. Tsotha screamed a curse, but the great stallion took the last leap with a straining groan, and gained the southern bank. Then the wizard fled away into the empty meadowland, and on his trail came the king, riding madly and silently, swinging the great sword that spattered his trail with crimson drips.____On they fled, the hunted and the hunter, and not a foot could the black stallion gain, though he strained each nerve and threw. Through a sunset land of dim light and illusive shadows they fled, till sight and sound of the slaughter died out behind them. Then in the sky appeared a dot, that grew into a huge eagle as it approached. Swooping down from the sky, it drove at the head of Tsotha's steed, which screamed and reared, throwing his rider.____Old Tsotha rose and faced his pursuer, his eyes those of a maddened serpent, his face an inhuman mask of awful fury. In each hand he held something that shimmered, and Conan knew he held death there.____The king dismounted and strode toward his foe, his armor clanking, his great sword gripped high.____'Again we meet, wizard!' he grinned savagely.____'Keep off!' screamed Tsotha like a blood-mad jackal. 'I'll blast the flesh from your bones! You can not conquer me - if you hack me in pieces, the bits of flesh and bone will reunite and haunt you to your doom! I see the hand of Pelias in this, but I defy ye both! I am Tsotha, son of?____Conan rushed, sword gleaming, eyes slits of wariness. Tsotha's right hand came back and forward, and the king ducked quickly. Something passed by his helmeted head and exploded behind him, searing the very sands with a flash of hellish fire. Before Tsotha could toss the globe in his left hand, Conan's sword sheared through his lean neck. The wizard's head shot from his shoulders on an arching fount of blood, and the robed figure staggered and crumpled drunkenly. Yet the mad black eyes glared up at Conan with no dimming of their feral light, the lips writhed awfully, and the hands groped hideously, as if searching for the severed head. Then with a swift rush of wings, something swooped from the sky - the eagle which had attacked Tsotha's horse. In its mighty talons it snatched up the dripping head and soared skyward, and Conan stood struck dumb, for from the eagle's throat boomed human laughter, in the voice of Pelias the sorcerer.____Then a hideous thing came to pass, for the headless body reared up from the sand, and staggered away in awful flight on stiffening legs, hands outstretched blindly toward the dot speeding and dwindling in the dusky sky. Conan stood like one turned to stone, watching until the swift reeling figure faded in the dusk that purpled the meadows.____'Crom!' his mighty shoulders twitched. 'A murrain on

these wizardly feuds! Pelias has dealt well with me, but I care not if I see him no more. Give me a clean sword and a clean foe to flesh it in. Damnation! What would I not give for a flagon of wine!' _____THE HOUR OF THE DRAGON_____The Lion Banner sways and falls in the horror-haunted gloom;___A scarlet Dragon rustles by, borne on winds of doom. ___In heaps the shining horsemen lie, where the thrusting lances break,___And deep in the haunted mountains, the lost, black gods awake. ___Dead hands grope in the shadows, the stars turn pale with fright, ___For this is the Dragon's Hour, the triumph of Fear and Night._____1 O Sleeper, Awake!_____The long tapers flickered, sending the black shadows wavering along the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carven jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees. ___Inside the chamber was tense silence, and the wavering of the shadows, while four pairs of eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the long green case across which cryptic hieroglyphics writhed, as if lent life and movement by the unsteady light. The man at the foot of the sarcophagus leaned over it and moved his candle as if he were writing with a pen, inscribing a mystic symbol in the air. Then he set down the candle in its black gold stick at the foot of the case, and, mumbling some formula unintelligible to his companions, he thrust a broad white hand into his fur-trimmed robe. When he brought it forth again it was as if he cupped in his palm a ball of living fire. ___The other three drew in their breath sharply, and the dark, powerful man who stood at the head of the sarcophagus whispered: 'The Heart of Ahriman!' The other lifted a quick hand for silence. Somewhere a dog began howling dolefully, and a stealthy step padded outside the barred and bolted door. But none looked aside from the mummy-case over which the man in the ermine-trimmed robe was now moving the great flaming jewel while he muttered an incantation that was old when Atlantis sank. The glare of the gem dazzled their eyes, so that they could not be sure of what they saw; but with a splintering crash, the carven lid of the sarcophagus burst outward as if from some irresistible pressure applied from within, and the four men, bending eagerly forward, saw the occupant - a huddled, withered, wizened shape, with dried brown limbs like dead wood showing through moldering bandages. ___'Bring that thing back"?' muttered the small dark man who stood on the right, with a short sardonic laugh. 'It is ready to crumble at a touch. We are fools?' ___'Shhh!' It was an urgent hiss of command from the large man who held the jewel. Perspiration stood upon his broad white forehead and his eyes were dilated. He leaned forward, and, without touching the thing with his hand, laid on the breast of the mummy the blazing jewel. Then he drew back and watched with fierce intensity, his lips moving in soundless invocation. ___It was as if a globe of living fire flickered and burned on the dead, withered bosom. And breath sucked in, hissing, through the clenched teeth of the watchers. For as they watched, an awful transmutation became apparent. The withered shape in the sarcophagus was expanding, was growing, lengthening. The bandages burst and fell into brown dust. The shriveled limbs swelled, straightened. Their dusky hue began to fade. ___'By Mitra!' whispered the tall, yellow-haired man on the left. 'He was not a Stygian. That part at least was true.' ___Again a trembling finger warned for silence. The hound outside was no longer howling. He whimpered, as with an evil dream, and then that sound, too, died away in silence, in which the yellow-haired man

plainly heard the straining of the heavy door, as if something outside pushed powerfully upon it. He half turned, his hand at his sword, but the man in the ermine robe hissed an urgent warning: 'Stay! Do not break the chain! And on your life do not go to the door!'___The yellow-haired man shrugged and turned back, and then he stopped short, staring. In the jade sarcophagus lay a living man: a tall, lusty man, naked, white of skin, and dark of hair and beard. He lay motionless, his eyes wide open, and blank and unknowing as a newborn babe's. On his breast the great jewel smoldered and sparkled. ___The man in ermine reeled as if from some let-down of extreme tension. ___'Ishtar!' he gasped. 'It is Xaltotun! - and he lives! Valerius! Tarascus! Amalric! Do you see? Do you see? You doubted me - but I have not failed! We have been close to the open gates of hell this night, and the shapes of darkness have gathered close about us - aye, they followed him to the very door - but we have brought the great magician back to life.' ___'And damned our souls to purgatories everlasting, I doubt not,' muttered the small, dark man, Tarascus. The yellow-haired man, Valerius, laughed harshly. 'What purgatory can be worse than life itself? So we are all damned together from birth. Besides, who would not sell his miserable soul for a throne?' ___'There is no intelligence in his stare, Orastes,' said the large man. ___'He has long been dead,' answered Orastes. 'He is as one newly awakened. His mind is empty after the long sleep - nay, he was dead, not sleeping. We brought his spirit back over the voids and gulfs of night and oblivion. I will speak to him.' ___He bent over the foot of the sarcophagus, and fixing his gaze on the wide dark eyes of the man within, he said, slowly: 'Awake, Xaltotun!' ___The lips of the man moved mechanically. 'Xaltotun!' he repeated in a groping whisper. ___'You are Xaltotun!' exclaimed Orastes, like a hypnotist driving home his suggestions. 'You are Xaltotun of Python, in Acheron.' A dim flame flickered in the dark eyes. ___'I was Xaltotun,' he whispered. 'I am dead.' ___'You are Xaltotun!' cried Orastes. 'You are not dead! You live!' ___'I am Xaltotun,' came the eery whisper, 'But I am dead. In my house in Khemi, in Stygia, there I died.' ___'And the priests who poisoned you mummified your body with their dark arts, keeping all your organs intact!' exclaimed Orastes. 'But now you live again! The Heart of Ahriman has restored your life, drawn your spirit back from space and eternity.' ___'The Heart of Ahriman!' The flame of remembrance grew stronger. 'The barbarians stole it from me!' ___'He remembers,' muttered Orastes. 'Lift him from the case.' ___The others obeyed hesitantly, as if reluctant to touch the man they had recreated, and they seemed not easier in their minds when they felt firm muscular flesh, vibrant with blood and life, beneath their fingers. But they lifted him upon the table, and Orastes clothed him in a curious dark velvet robe, splashed with gold stars and crescent moons, and fastened a cloth-of-gold fillet about his temples, confining the black wavy locks that fell to his shoulders. He let them do as they would, saying nothing, not even when they set him in a carved throne-like chair with a high ebony back and wide silver arms, and feet like golden claws. He sat there motionless, and slowly intelligence grew in his dark eyes and made them deep and strange and luminous. It was as if long-sunken witchlights floated slowly up through midnight pools of darkness. ___Orastes cast a furtive glance at his companions, who stood staring in morbid fascination at their strange guest. Their iron nerves had withstood an ordeal that might have driven weaker men mad. He knew it was with no weaklings that he conspired, but men whose courage was as profound as their lawless ambitions and capacity for evil. He turned his attention to the figure in the ebon-black chair. And this one spoke

at last. ___ 'I remember,' he said in a strong, resonant voice, speaking Nemedian with a curious, archaic accent. 'I am Xaltotun, who was high priest of Set in Python, which was in Acheron. The Heart of Ahriman - I dreamed I had found it again - where is it?' ___ Orastes placed it in his hand, and he drew breath deeply as he gazed into the depths of the terrible jewel burning in his grasp. ___ 'They stole it from me, long ago,' he said. 'The red heart of the night it is, strong to save or to damn. It came from afar, and from long ago. While I held it, none could stand before me. But it was stolen from me, and Acheron fell, and I fled an exile into dark Stygia. Much I remember, but much I have forgotten. I have been in a far land, across misty voids and gulfs and unlit oceans. What is the year?' ___ Orastes answered him. 'It is the waning of the Year of the Lion, three thousand years after the fall of Acheron.' ___ 'Three thousand years!' murmured the other. 'So long? Who are you?' ___ 'I am Orastes, once a priest of Mitra. This man is Amalric, baron of Tor, in Nemedias; this other is Tarascus, younger brother of the king of Nemedias; and this tall man is Valerius, rightful heir of the throne of Aquilonia.' ___ 'Why have you given me life?' demanded Xaltotun. 'What do you require of me?' ___ The man was now fully alive and awake, his keen eyes reflecting the working of an unclouded brain. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his manner. He came directly to the point, as one who knows that no man gives something for nothing. Orastes met him with equal candor. ___ 'We have opened the doors of hell this night to free your soul and return it to your body because we need your aid. We wish to place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedias, and to win for Valerius the crown of Aquilonia. With your necromancy you can aid us.' ___ Xaltotun's mind was devious and full of unexpected slants. ___ 'You must be deep in the arts yourself, Orastes, to have been able to restore my life. How is it that a priest of Mitra knows of the Heart of Ahriman, and the incantations of Skelos?' ___ 'I am no longer a priest of Mitra,' answered Orastes. 'I was cast forth from my order because of my delving in black magic. But for Amalric there I might have been burned as a magician. ___ 'But that left me free to pursue my studies. I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the iron-bound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back life to your shriveled corpse. From moldering manuscripts I learned of the Heart of Ahriman. Then for a year I sought its hiding-place, and at last I found it.' ___ 'Then why trouble to bring me back to life?' demanded Xaltotun, with his piercing gaze fixed on the priest. 'Why did you not employ the Heart to further your own power?' ___ 'Because no man today knows the secrets of the Heart,' answered Orastes. 'Not even in legends live the arts by which to loose its full powers. I knew it could restore life; of its deeper secrets I am ignorant. I merely used it to bring you back to life. It is the use of your knowledge we seek. As for the Heart, you alone know its awful secrets.' ___ Xaltotun shook his head, staring broodingly into the flaming depths. ___ 'My necromantic knowledge is greater than the sum of all the knowledge of other men,' he said; 'yet I do not know the full power of the jewel. I did not invoke it in the old days; I guarded it lest it be used against me. At last it was stolen, and in the hands of a feathered shaman of the barbarians it defeated all my mighty sorcery. Then it vanished, and I was poisoned by the jealous priests of Stygia before I could learn where it was hidden.' ___ 'It was hidden in a cavern below the temple of

Mitra, in Tarantia,' said Orastes. 'By devious ways I discovered this, after I had located your remains in Set's subterranean temple in Stygia.____'Zamorian thieves, partly protected by spells I learned from sources better left unmentioned, stole your mummy-case from under the very talons of those which guarded it in the dark, and by camel-caravan and galley and ox-wagon it came at last to this city.____'Those same thieves - or rather those of them who still lived after their frightful quest - stole the Heart of Ahriman from its haunted cavern below the temple of Mitra, and all the skill of men and the spells of sorcerers nearly failed. One man of them lived long enough to reach me and give the jewel into my hands, before he died slavering and gibbering of what he had seen in that accursed crypt. The thieves of Zamora are the most faithful of men to their trust. Even with my conjurements, none but they could have stolen the Heart from where it has lain in demon-guarded darkness since the fall of Acheron, three thousand years ago.'____Xaltotun lifted his lion-like head and stared far off into space, as if plumbing the lost centuries.____'Three thousand years!' he muttered. 'Set! Tell me what has chanced in the world.'____'The barbarians who overthrew Acheron set up new kingdoms,' quoted Orastes. 'Where the empire had stretched now rose realms called Aquilonia, and Nemedias, and Argos, from the tribes that founded them. The older kingdoms of Ophir, Corinthia and western Koth, which had been subject to the kings of Acheron, regained their independence with the fall of the empire.'____'And what of the people of Acheron?' demanded Xaltotun. 'When I fled into Stygia, Python was in ruins, and all the great, purple-towered cities of Acheron fouled with blood and trampled by the sandals of the barbarians.'____'In the hills small groups of folk still boast descent from Acheron,' answered Orastes. 'For the rest, the tide of my barbarian ancestors rolled over them and wiped them out. They - my ancestors - had suffered much from the kings of Acheron.'____A grim and terrible smile curled the Pythonian's lips.____'Aye! Many a barbarian, both man and woman, died screaming on the altar under this hand. I have seen their heads piled to make a pyramid in the great square in Python when the kings returned from the west with their spoils and naked captives.'____'Aye. And when the day of reckoning came, the sword was not spared. So Acheron ceased to be, and purple-towered Python became a memory of forgotten days. But the younger kingdoms rose on the imperial ruins and waxed great. And now we have brought you back to aid us to rule these kingdoms, which, if less strange and wonderful than Acheron of old, are yet rich and powerful, well worth fighting for. Look!' Orastes unrolled before the stranger a map drawn cunningly on vellum.____Xaltotun regarded it, and then shook his head, baffled.____'The very outlines of the land are changed. It is like some familiar thing seen in a dream, fantastically distorted.'____'Howbeit,' answered Orastes, tracing with his forefinger, 'here is Belverus, the capital of Nemedias, in which we now are. Here run the boundaries of the land of Nemedias. To the south and southeast are Ophir and Corinthia, to the east Brythunia, to the west Aquilonia.'____'It is the map of a world I do not know,' said Xaltotun softly, but Orastes did not miss the lurid fire of hate that flickered in his dark eyes.____'It is a map you shall help us change,' answered Orastes. 'It is our desire first to set Tarascus on the throne of Nemedias. We wish to accomplish this without strife, and in such a way that no suspicion will rest on Tarascus. We do not wish the land to be torn by civil wars, but to reserve all our power for the conquest of Aquilonia.____'Should King Nimed and his sons die naturally, in a plague for instance, Tarascus would mount the throne as the next heir, peacefully and unopposed.'____Xaltotun nodded,

without replying, and Orastes continued.____'The other task will be more difficult. We cannot set Valerius on the Aquilonian throne without a war, and that kingdom is a formidable foe. Its people are a hardy, war-like race, toughened by continual wars with the Picts, Zingarians and Cimmerians. For five hundred years Aquilonia and Nemedias have intermittently waged war, and the ultimate advantage has always lain with the Aquilonians.____'Their present king is the most renowned warrior among the western nations. He is an outlander, an adventurer who seized the crown by force during a time of civil strife, strangling King Nemedides with his own hands, upon the very throne. His name is Conan, and no man can stand before him in battle.____'Valerius is now the rightful heir of the throne. He had been driven into exile by his royal kinsman, Nemedides, and has been away from his native realm for years, but he is of the blood of the old dynasty, and many of the barons would secretly hail the overthrow of Conan, who is a nobody without royal or even noble blood. But the common people are loyal to him, and the nobility of the outlying provinces. Yet if his forces were overthrown in the battle that must first take place, and Conan himself slain, I think it would not be difficult to put Valerius on the throne. Indeed, with Conan slain, the only center of the government would be gone. He is not part of a dynasty, but only a lone adventurer.'____'I wish that I might see this king,' mused Xaltotun, glancing toward a silvery mirror which formed one of the panels of the wall. This mirror cast no reflection, but Xaltotun's expression showed that he understood its purpose, and Orastes nodded with the pride a good craftsman takes in the recognition of his accomplishments by a master of his craft.____'I will try to show him to you,' he said. And seating himself before the mirror, he gazed hypnotically into its depths, where presently a dim shadow began to take shape.____It was uncanny, but those watching knew it was no more than the reflected image of Orastes' thought, embodied in that mirror as a wizard's thoughts are embodied in a magic crystal. It floated hazily, then leaped into startling clarity - a tall man, mightily shouldered and deep of chest, with a massive corded neck and heavily muscled limbs. He was clad in silk and velvet, with the royal lions of Aquilonia worked in gold upon his rich jupon, and the crown of Aquilonia shone on his square-cut black mane; but the great sword at his side seemed more natural to him than the regal accouterments. His brow was low and broad, his eyes a volcanic blue that smoldered as if with some inner fire. His dark, scarred, almost sinister face was that of a fighting-man, and his velvet garments could not conceal the hard, dangerous lines of his limbs.____'That man is no Hyborian!' exclaimed Xaltotun.____'No; he is a Cimmerian, one of those wild tribesmen who dwell in the gray hills of the north.'____'I fought his ancestors of old,' muttered Xaltotun. 'Not even the kings of Acheron could conquer them.'____'They still remain a terror to the nations of the south,' answered Orastes. 'He is a true son of that savage race, and has proved himself, thus far, unconquerable.'____Xaltotun did not reply; he sat staring down at the pool of living fire that shimmered in his hand. Outside, the hound howled again, long and shudderingly._____2 A Black Wind Blows_____The year of the dragon had birth in war and pestilence and unrest. The black plague stalked through the streets of Belverus, striking down the merchant in his stall, the serf in his kennel, the knight at his banquet board. Before it the arts of the leeches were helpless. Men said it had been sent from hell as punishment for the sins of pride and lust. It was swift and deadly as the stroke of an adder. The victim's body turned purple and then black, and within a few

minutes he sank down dying, and the stench of his own putrefaction was in his nostrils even before death wrenched his soul from his rotting body. A hot, roaring wind blew incessantly from the south, and the crops withered in the fields, the cattle sank and died in their tracks. ___Men cried out on Mitra, and muttered against the king; for somehow, throughout the kingdom, the word was whispered that the king was secretly addicted to loathsome practises and foul debauches in the seclusion of his nighted palace. And then in that palace death stalked grinning on feet about which swirled the monstrous vapors of the plague. In one night the king died with his three sons, and the drums that thundered their dirge drowned the grim and ominous bells that rang from the carts that lumbered through the streets gathering up the rotting dead. ___That night, just before dawn, the hot wind that had blown for weeks ceased to rustic evilly through the silken window curtains. Out of the north rose a great wind that roared among the towers, and there was cataclysmic thunder, and blinding sheets of lightning, and driving rain. But the dawn shone clean and green and clear; the scorched ground veiled itself in grass, the thirsty crops sprang up anew, and the plague was gone - its miasma swept clean out of the land by the mighty wind. ___Men said the gods were satisfied because the evil king and his spawn were slain, and when his young brother Tarascus was crowned in the great coronation hall, the populace cheered until the towers rocked, acclaiming the monarch on whom the gods smiled. ___Such a wave of enthusiasm and rejoicing as swept the land is frequently the signal for a war of conquest. So no one was surprised when it was announced that King Tarascus had declared the truce made by the late king with their western neighbors void, and was gathering his hosts to invade Aquilonia. His reason was candid; his motives, loudly proclaimed, gilded his actions with something of the glamor of a crusade. He espoused the cause of Valerius, 'rightful heir to the throne'; he came, he proclaimed, not as an enemy of Aquilonia, but as a friend, to free the people from the tyranny, of a usurper and a foreigner. ___If there were cynical smiles in certain quarters, and whispers concerning the king's good friend Amalric, whose vast personal wealth seemed to be flowing into the rather depleted royal treasury, they were unheeded in the general wave of fervor and zeal of Tarascus' popularity. If any shrewd individuals suspected that Amalric was the real ruler of Nemedica, behind the scenes, they were careful not to voice such heresy. And the war went forward with enthusiasm. ___The king and his allies moved westward at the head of fifty thousand men - knights in shining armor with their pennons streaming above their helmets, pikemen in steel caps and bri-gandines, crossbowmen in leather jerkins. They crossed the border, took a frontier castle and burned three mountain villages, and then, in the valley of the Valkia, ten miles west of the boundary line, they met the hosts of Conan, king of Aquilonia - forty-five thousand knights, archers and men-at-arms, the flower of Aquilonian strength and chivalry. Only the knights of Poitain, under Prospero, had not yet arrived, for they had far to ride up from the southwestern corner of the kingdom. Tarascus had struck without warning. His invasion had come on the heels of his proclamation, without formal declaration of war. ___The two hosts confronted each other across a wide, shallow valley, with rugged cliffs, and a shallow stream winding through masses of reeds and willows down the middle of the vale. The camp-followers of both hosts came down to this stream for water, and shouted insults and hurled stones across at one another. The last glints of the sun shone on the golden banner of Nemedica with the scarlet dragon, unfurled in the

breeze above the pavilion of King Tarascus on an eminence near the eastern cliffs. But the shadow of the western cliffs fell like a vast purple pall across the tents and the army of Aquilonia, and upon the black banner with its golden lion that floated above King Conan's pavilion.____All night the fires flared the length of the valley, and the wind brought the call of trumpets, the clangor of arms, and the sharp challenges of the sentries who paced their horses along either edge of the willow-grown stream.____It was in the darkness before dawn that King Conan stirred on his couch, which was no more than a pile of silks and furs thrown on a dais, and awakened. He started up, crying out sharply and clutching at his sword. Pallantides, his commander, rushing in at the cry, saw his king sitting upright, his hand on his hilt, and perspiration dripping from his strangely pale face. 'Your Majesty!' exclaimed Pallantides. 'Is aught amiss?' 'What of the camp?' demanded Conan. 'Are the guards out?' 'Five hundred horsemen patrol the stream, Your Majesty,' answered the general. 'The Nemedians have not offered to move against us in the night. They wait for dawn, even as we.'____'By Crom,' muttered Conan. 'I awoke with a feeling that doom was creeping on me in the night.'____He stared up at the great golden lamp which shed a soft glow over the velvet hangings and carpets of the great tent. They were alone; not even a slave or a page slept on the carpeted floor; but Conan's eyes blazed as they were wont to blaze in the teeth of great peril, and the sword quivered in his hand. Pallantides watched him uneasily. Conan seemed to be listening. 'Listen!' hissed the king. 'Did you hear it? A furtive step!' 'Seven knights guard your tent, Your Majesty,' said Pallantides. 'None could approach it unchallenged.'____'Not outside,' growled Conan. 'It seemed to sound inside the tent.'____Pallantides cast a swift, startled look around. The velvet hangings merged with shadows in the corners, but if there had been anyone in the pavilion besides themselves, the general would have seen him. Again he shook his head.____'There is no one here, sire. You sleep in the midst of your host.'____'I have seen death strike a king in the midst of thousands,' muttered Conan. 'Something that walks on invisible feet and is not seen?'____'Perhaps you were dreaming, Your Majesty,' said Pallantides, somewhat perturbed.____'So I was,' grunted Conan. 'A devilish dream it was, too. I trod again all the long, weary roads I traveled on my way to the kingship.'____He fell silent, and Pallantides stared at him unspeaking. The king was an enigma to the general, as to most of his civilized subjects. Pallantides knew that Conan had walked many strange roads in his wild, eventful life, and had been many things before a twist of Fate set him on the throne of Aquilonia.____'I saw again the battlefield whereon I was born,' said Conan, resting his chin moodily on a massive fist. 'I saw myself in a pantherskin loin-clout, throwing my spear at the mountain beasts. I was a mercenary swordsman again, a hetman of the kozaki who dwell along the Zaporoska River, a corsair looting the coasts of Kush, a pirate of the Barachan Isles, a chief of the Himelian hillmen. All these things I've been, and of all these things I dreamed; all the shapes that have been I passed like an endless procession, and their feet beat out a dirge in the sounding dust.____'But throughout my dreams moved strange, veiled figures and ghostly shadows, and a faraway voice mocked me. And toward the last I seemed to see myself lying on this dais in my tent, and a shape bent over me, robed and hooded. I lay unable to move, and then the hood fell away and a moldering skull grinned down at me. Then it was that I awoke.'____'This is an evil dream, Your Majesty,' said Pallantides, suppressing a shudder. 'But no more.'____Conan shook his head, more in doubt than in denial. He came of

a barbaric race, and the superstitions and instincts of his heritage lurked close beneath the surface of his consciousness. ___ 'I've dreamed many evil dreams,' he said, 'and most of them were meaningless. But by Crom, this was not like most dreams! I wish this battle were fought and won, for I've had a grisly premonition ever since King Nimed died in the black plague. Why did it cease when he died?' ___ 'Men say he sinned?' ___ 'Men are fools, as always,' grunted Conan. 'If the plague struck all who sinned, then by Crom there wouldn't be enough left to count the living! Why should the gods - who the priests tell me are just - slay five hundred peasants and merchants and nobles before they slew the king, if the whole pestilence were aimed at him? Were the gods smiting blindly, like swordsmen in a fog? By Mitra, if I aimed my strokes no straighter, Aquilonia would have had a new king long ago. ___ 'No! The black plague's no common pestilence. It lurks in Stygian tombs, and is called forth into being only by wizards. I was a swordsman in Prince Almuric's army that invaded Stygia, and of his thirty thousand, fifteen thousand perished by Stygian arrows, and the rest by the black plague that rolled on us like a wind out of the south. I was the only man who lived.' ___ 'Yet only five hundred died in Nemediia,' argued Pallantides. ___ 'Whoever called it into being knew how to cut it short at will,' answered Conan. 'So I know there was something planned and diabolical about it. Someone called it forth, someone banished it when the work was completed - when Tarascus was safe on the throne and being hailed as the deliverer of the people from the wrath of the gods. By Crom, I sense a black, subtle brain behind all this. What of this stranger who men say gives counsel to Tarascus?' ___ 'He wears a veil,' answered Pallantides; 'they say he is a foreigner; a stranger from Stygia.' ___ 'A stranger from Stygia!' repeated Conan scowling. 'A stranger from hell, more like! - Ha! What is that?' ___ 'The trumpets of the Nemedians!' exclaimed Pallantides. 'And hark, how our own blare upon their heels! Dawn is breaking, and the captains are marshaling the hosts for the onset! Mitra be with them, for many will not see the sun go down behind the crags.' ___ 'Send my squires to me!' exclaimed Conan, rising with alacrity and casting off his velvet night-garment; he seemed to have forgotten his forebodings at the prospect of action. 'Go to the captains and see that all is in readiness. I will be with you as soon as I don my armor.' ___ Many of Conan's ways were inexplicable to the civilized people he ruled, and one of them was his insistence on sleeping alone in his chamber or tent. Pallantides hastened from the pavilion, clanking in the armor he had donned at midnight after a few hours' sleep. He cast a swift glance over the camp, which was beginning to swarm with activity, mail clinking and men moving about dimly in the uncertain light, among the long lines of tents. Stars still glimmered palely in the western sky, but long pink streamers stretched along the eastern horizon, and against them the dragon banner of Nemediia flung out its billowing silken folds. ___ Pallantides turned toward a smaller tent near by, where slept the royal squires. These were tumbling out already, roused by the trumpets. And as Pallantides called to them to hasten, he was frozen speechless by a deep fierce shout and the impact of a heavy blow inside the king's tent, followed by the heart-stopping crash of a falling body. There sounded a low laugh that turned the general's blood to ice. ___ Echoing the cry, Pallantides wheeled and rushed back into the pavilion. He cried out again as he saw Conan's powerful frame stretched out on the carpet. The king's great two-handed sword lay near his hand, and a shattered tent-pole seemed to show where his stroke had fallen. Pallantides' sword was out, and he glared about

the tent, but nothing met his gaze. Save for the king and himself it was empty, as it had been when he left it. ___'Your Majesty!' Pallantides threw himself on his knee beside the fallen giant. ___Conan's eyes were open; they blazed up at him with full intelligence and recognition. His lips writhed, but no sound came forth. He seemed unable to move. ___Voices sounded without. Pallantides rose swiftly and stepped to the door. The royal squires and one of the knights who guarded the tent stood there. ___'We heard a sound within,' said the knight apologetically. 'Is all well with the king?' ___Pallantides regarded him searchingly. ___'None has entered or left the pavilion this night?' ___'None save yourself, my lord,' answered the knight, and Pallantides could not doubt his honesty. ___'The king stumbled and dropped his sword,' said Pallantides briefly. 'Return to your post.' ___As the knight turned away, the general covertly motioned to the five royal squires, and when they had followed him in, he drew the flap closely. They turned pale at the sight of the king stretched upon the carpet, but Pallantides' quick gesture checked their exclamations. ___The general bent over him again, and again Conan made an effort to speak. The veins in his temples and the cords in his neck swelled with his efforts, and he lifted his head clear of the ground. Voice came at last, mumbling and half intelligible. ___'The thing - the thing in the corner? ___Pallantides lifted his head and looked fearfully about him. He saw the pale faces of the squires in the lamplight, the velvet shadows that lurked along the walls of the pavilion. That was all. ___'There is nothing here, Your Majesty,' he said. ___'It was there, in the corner,' muttered the king, tossing his lion-maned head from side to side in his efforts to rise. 'A man - at least he looked like a man - wrapped in rags like a mummy's bandages, with a moldering cloak drawn about him, and a hood. All I could see was his eyes, as he crouched there in the shadows. I thought he was a shadow himself, until I saw his eyes. They were like black jewels. ___'I made at him and swung my sword, but I missed him clean - how, Crom knows - and splintered that pole instead. He caught my wrist as I staggered off balance, and his fingers burned like hot iron. All the strength went out of me, and the floor rose and struck me like a club. Then he was gone, and I was down, and - curse him! - I can't move! I'm paralysed!' ___Pallantides lifted the giant's hand, and his flesh crawled. On the king's wrist showed the blue marks of long, lean fingers. What hand could grip so hard as to leave its print on that thick wrist? Pallantides remembered that low laugh he had heard as he rushed into the tent, and cold perspiration beaded his skin. It had not been Conan who laughed. ___'This is a thing diabolical!' whispered a trembling squire. 'Men say the children of darkness war for Tarascus!' ___'Be silent!' ordered Pallantides sternly. ___Outside, the dawn was dimming the stars. A light wind sprang up from the peaks, and brought the fanfare of a thousand trumpets. At the sound a convulsive shudder ran through the king's mighty form. Again the veins in his temples knotted as he strove to break the invisible shackles which crushed him down. ___'Put my harness on me and tie me into my saddle,' he whispered. 'I'll lead the charge yet!' ___Pallantides shook his head, and a squire plucked his skirt. ___'My lord, we are lost if the host learns the king has been smitten! Only he could have led us to victory this day.' ___'Help me lift him on the dais,' answered the general. ___They obeyed, and laid the helpless giant on the furs, and spread a silken cloak over him. Pallantides turned to the five squires and searched their pale faces long before he spoke. ___'Our lips must be sealed for ever as to what happens in this tent,' he said at last. 'The

kingdom of Aquilonia depends upon it. One of you go and fetch me the officer Valannus, who is a captain of the Pellian spearmen.'___The squire indicated bowed and hastened from the tent, and Pallantides stood staring down at the stricken king, while outside trumpets blared, drums thundered, and the roar of the multitudes rose in the growing dawn. Presently the squire returned with the officer Pallantides had named - a tall man, broad and powerful, built much like the king. Like him, also, he had thick black hair. But his eyes were gray and he did not resemble Conan in his features.'___'The king is stricken by a strange malady,' said Pallantides briefly. 'A great honor is yours; you are to wear his armor and ride at the head of the host today. None must know that it is not the king who rides.'___'It is an honor for which a man might gladly give up his life ' stammered the captain, overcome by the suggestion. 'Mitra grant that I do not fail of this mighty trust!''___And while the fallen king stared with burning eyes that reflected the bitter rage and humiliation that ate his heart, the squires stripped Valannus of mail shirt, burganet and leg-pieces, and clad him in Conan's armor of black plate-mail, with the vizored salade, and the dark plumes nodding over the wivern crest. Over all they put the silken surcoat with the royal lion worked in gold upon the breast, and they girt him with a broad gold-buckled belt which supported a jewel-hiked broadsword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard. While they worked, trumpets clamored outside, arms clanged, and across the river rose a deep-throated roar as squadron after squadron swung into place.'___Full-armed, Valannus dropped to his knee and bent his plumes before the figure that lay on the dais.'___'Lord king, Mitra grant that I do not dishonor the harness I wear this day!''___'Bring me Tarascus' head and I'll make you a baron!' In the stress of his anguish Conan's veneer of civilization had fallen from him. His eyes flamed, he ground his teeth in fury and blood-lust, as barbaric as any tribesmen in the Cimmerian hills. _____3 The Cliffs Reel _____The Aquilonian host was drawn up, long serried lines of pike-men and horsemen in gleaming steel, when a giant figure in black armor emerged from the royal pavilion, and as he swung up into the saddle of the black stallion held by four squires, a roar that shook the mountains went up from the host. They shook their blades and thundered forth their acclaim of their warrior king - knights in gold-chased armor, pikemen in mail coats and basinets, archers in their leather jerkins, with their longbows in their left hand.'___The host on the opposite side of the valley was in motion, trotting down the long gentle slope toward the river; their steel shone through the mists of morning that swirled about their horses' feet.'___The Aquilonian host moved leisurely to meet them. The measured tramp of the armored horses made the ground tremble. Banners flung out long silken folds in the morning wind; lances swayed like a bristling forest, dipped and sank, their pennons fluttering about them.'___Ten men-at-arms, grim, taciturn veterans who could hold their tongues, guarded the royal pavilion. One squire stood in the tent, peering out through a slit in the doorway. But for the handful in the secret, no one else in the vast host knew that it was not Conan who rode on the great stallion at the head of the army.'___The Aquilonian host had assumed the customary formation: the strongest part was the center, composed entirely of heavily armed knights; the wings were made up of smaller bodies of horsemen, mounted men-at-arms, mostly, supported by pike-men and archers. The latter were Bossonians from the western marches, strongly built men of medium stature, in leathern jackets and iron head-pieces.'___The Nemedian army came on in similar formation, and the two hosts moved toward the river, the wings in

advance of the centers. In the center of the Aquilonian host the great lion banner streamed its billowing black folds over the steel-clad figure on the black stallion. ___But on his dais in the royal pavilion Conan groaned in anguish of spirit, and cursed with strange heathen oaths. ___'The hosts move together,' quoth the squire, watching from the door. 'Hear the trumpets peal! Ha! The rising sun strikes fire from lance-heads and helmets until I am dazzled. It turns the river crimson - aye, it will be truly crimson before this day is done! ___'The foe have reached the river. Now arrows fly between the hosts like stinging clouds that hide the sun. Ha! Well loosed, bowmen! The Bossonians have the better of it! Hark to them shout!' ___Faintly in the ears of the king, above the din of trumpets and clanging steel, came the deep fierce shout of the Bossonians as they drew and loosed in perfect unison. ___'Their archers seek to hold ours in play while their knights ride into the river,' said the squire, 'the banks are not steep; they slope to the water's edge. The knights come on, they crash through the willows. By Mitra, the clothyard shafts find every crevice of their harness! Horses and men go down, struggling and thrashing in the water. It is not deep, nor is the current swift, but men are drowning there, dragged under by their armor, and trampled by the frantic horses. Now the knights of Aquilonia advance. They ride into the water and engage the knights of Nemedias. The water swirls about their horses' bellies and the clang of sword against sword is deafening.' ___'Crom' burst in agony from Conan's lips. Life was coursing sluggishly back into his veins, but still he could not lift his mighty frame from the dais. ___'The wings close in,' said the squire. Tikemen and swordsmen fight hand to hand in the stream, and behind them the bowmen ply their shafts. ___'By Mitra, the Nemedian arbalesters are sorely harried, and the Bossonians arch their arrows to drop amid the rear ranks. Their center gains not a foot, and their wings are pushed back up from the stream again.' ___'Crom, Ymir, and Mitra!' raged Conan. 'Gods and devils, could I but reach the fighting, if but to die at the first blow!' ___Outside through the long hot day the battle stormed and thundered. The valley shook to charge and counter-charge, to the whistling of shafts, and the crash of rending shields and splintering lances. But the hosts of Aquilonia held fast. Once they were forced back from the bank, but a counter-charge, with the black banner flowing over the black stallion, regained the lost ground. And like an iron rampart they held the right bank of the stream, and at last the squire gave Conan the news that the Nemedians were falling back from the river. ___'Their wings are in confusion!' he cried. 'Their knights reel back from the sword-play. But what is this? Your banner is in morion - the center sweeps into the stream! By Mitra, Valannus is leading the host across the river!' ___'Fool!' groaned Conan. 'It may be a trick. He should hold his position; by dawn Prospero will be here with the Poitanian levies.' ___'The knights ride into a hail of arrows!' cried the squire. 'But they do not falter! They sweep on - they have crossed! They charge up the slope! Pallantides has hurled the wings across the river to their support! It is all he can do. The lion banner dips and staggers above the melee. ___'The knights of Nemedias make a stand. They are broken! They fall back! Their left wing is in full flight, and our pikemen cut them down as they run! I see Valannus, riding and smiting like a madman. He is carried beyond himself by the fighting-lust. Men no longer look to Pallantides. They follow Valannus, deeming him Conan as he rides with closed vizor. ___'But look! There is method in his madness! He swings wide of the Nemedian front, with five thousand knights, the pick of the army. The main host of the Nemedians is in

confusion -and look! Their flank is protected by the cliffs, but there is a defile left unguarded! It is like a great cleft in the wall that opens again behind the Nemedian lines. By Mitra, Valannus sees and seizes the opportunity! He has driven their wing before him, and he leads his knights toward that defile. They swing wide of the main battle; they cut through a line of spearmen, they charge into the defile! '___'An ambush!' cried Conan, striving to struggle upright. '___'No!' shouted the squire exultantly. 'The whole Nemedian host is in full sight! They have forgotten the defile! They never expected to be pushed back that far. Oh, fool, fool, Tarascus, to make such a blunder! Ah, I see lances and pennons pouring from the farther mouth of the defile, beyond the Nemedian lines. They will smite those ranks from the rear and crumple them. Mitra, what is this?' ___He staggered as the walls of the tent swayed drunkenly. Afar over the thunder of the fight rose a deep bellowing roar, indescribably ominous. ___'The cliffs reel!' shrieked the squire. 'Ah, gods, what is this? The river foams out of its channel, and the peaks are crumbling! The ground shakes and horses and riders in armor are overthrown! The cliffs! The cliffs are falling!' ___With his words there came a grinding rumble and a thunderous concussion, and the ground trembled. Over the roar of the battle sounded screams of mad terror. ___'The cliffs have crumbled!' cried the livid squire. 'They have thundered down into the defile and crushed every living creature in it! I saw the lion banner wave an instant amid the dust and falling stones, and then it vanished! Ha, the Nemedians shout with triumph! Well may they shout, for the fall of the cliffs has wiped out five thousand of our bravest knights - Hark!' ___To Conan's ears came a vast torrent of sound, rising and rising in frenzy: 'The king is dead! The king is dead! Flee! Flee! The king is dead?' ___'Liars!' panted Conan. 'Dogs! Knaves! Cowards! Oh, Crom, if I could but stand - but crawl to the river with my sword in my teeth! How, boy, do they flee?' ___'Aye!' sobbed the squire. 'They spur for the river; they are broken, hurled on like spume before a storm. I see Pallantides striving to stem the torrent - he is down, and the horses trample him! They rush into the river, knights, bowmen, pikemen, all mixed and mingled in one mad torrent of destruction. The Nemedians are on their heels, cutting them down like corn.' ___'But they will make a stand on this side of the river!' cried the king. With an effort that brought the sweat dripping from his temples, he heaved himself up on his elbows. ___'Nay!' cried the squire. 'They cannot! They are broken! Routed! Oh gods, that I should live to see this day!' ___Then he remembered his duty and shouted to the men-at-arms who stood stolidly watching the flight of their comrades. 'Get a horse, swiftly, and help me lift the king upon it. We dare not bide here.' ___But before they could do his bidding, the first drift of the storm was upon them. Knights and spearmen and archers fled among the tents, stumbling over ropes and baggage, and mingled with them were Nemedian riders, who smote right and left at all alien figures. Tent-ropes were cut, fire sprang up in a hundred places, and the plundering had already begun. The grim guardsmen about Conan's tent died where they stood, smiting and thrusting, and over their mangled corpses beat the hoofs of the conquerors. ___But the squire had drawn the flap close, and in the confused madness of the slaughter none realized that the pavilion held an occupant. So the flight and the pursuit swept past, and roared away up the valley, and the squire looked out presently to see a cluster of men approaching the royal tent with evident purpose. 'Here comes the king of Nemedias with four companions and his squire,' quoth he. 'He will accept your surrender, my fair lord?' ___'Surrender the devil's

heart!' gritted the king. He had forced himself up to a sitting posture. He swung his legs painfully off the dais, and staggered upright, reeling drunk-only. The squire ran to assist him, but Conan pushed him away. 'Give me that bow!' he gritted, indicating a longbow and quiver that hung from a tent-pole.____'But Your Majesty!' cried the squire in great perturbation. 'The battle is lost! It were the part of majesty to yield with the dignity becoming one of royal blood!''____'I have no royal blood,' ground Conan. 'I am a barbarian and the son of a blacksmith.'____Wrenching away the bow and an arrow he staggered toward the opening of the pavilion. So formidable was his appearance, naked but for short leather breeks and sleeveless shirt, open to reveal his great, hairy chest, with his huge limbs and his blue eyes blazing under his tangled black mane, that the squire shrank back, more afraid of his king than of the whole Neme-dian host.____Reeling on wide-braced legs Conan drunkenly tore the door-flap open and staggered out under the canopy. The king of Nemedias and his companions had dismounted, and they halted short, staring in wonder at the apparition confronting them.____'Here I am, you jackals!' roared the Cimmerian. 'I am the king! Death to you, dog-brothers!''____He jerked the arrow to its head and loosed, and the shaft feathered itself in the breast of the knight who stood beside Tarascus. Conan hurled the bow at the king of Nemedias. 'Curse my shaky hand! Come in and take me if you dare!' Reeling backward on unsteady legs, he fell with his shoulders against a tent-pole, and propped upright, he lifted his great sword with both hands.____'By Mitra, it is the king!' swore Tarascus. He cast a swift look about him, and laughed. 'That other was a jackal in his harness! In, dogs, and take his head!''____The three soldiers - men-at-arms wearing the emblem of the royal guards - rushed at the king, and one felled the squire with a blow of a mace. The other two fared less well. As the first rushed in, lifting his sword, Conan met him with a sweeping stroke that severed mail-links like cloth, and sheared the Neme-dian's arm and shoulder clean from his body. His corpse, pitching backward, fell across his companion's legs. The man stumbled, and before he could recover, the great sword was through him.____Conan wrenched out his steel with a racking gasp, and staggered back against the tent-pole. His great limbs trembled, his chest heaved, and sweat poured down his face and neck. But his eyes flamed with exultant savagery and he panted: 'Why do you stand afar off, dog of Belverus? I can't reach you; come in and die!''____Tarascus hesitated, glanced at the remaining man-at-arms, and his squire, a gaunt, saturnine man in black mail, and took a step forward. He was far inferior in size and strength to the giant Cimmerian, but he was in full armor, and was famed in all the western nations as a swordsman. But his squire caught his arm.____'Nay, Your Majesty, do not throw away your life. I will summon archers to shoot this barbarian, as we shoot lions.'____Neither of them had noticed that a chariot had approached while the fight was going on, and now came to a halt before them. But Conan saw, looking over their shoulders, and a queer chill sensation crawled along his spine. There was something vaguely unnatural about the appearance of the black horses that drew the vehicle, but it was the occupant of the chariot that arrested the king's attention.____He was a tall man, superbly built, clad in a long unadorned silk robe. He wore a Shemitish headdress, and its lower folds hid his features, except for the dark, magnetic eyes. The hands that grasped the reins, pulling the rearing horses back on their haunches, were white but strong. Conan glared at the stranger, all his primitive instincts roused. He sensed an aura of menace and power that exuded from this veiled figure, a menace as

definite as the windless waving of tall grass that marks the path of the serpent.____'Hail, Xaltotun!' exclaimed Tarascus. 'Here is the king of Aquilonia! He did not die in the landslide as we thought.'____'I know,' answered the other, without bothering to say how he knew. 'What is your present intention?'____'I will summon the archers to slay him,' answered the Neme-dian. 'As long as he lives he will be dangerous to us.'____'Yet even a dog has uses,' answered Xaltotun. 'Take him alive.'____Conan laughed raspily. 'Come in and try!' he challenged. 'But for my treacherous legs I'd hew you out of that chariot like a woodman hewing a tree. But you'll never take me alive, damn you!'____'He speaks the truth, I fear,' said Tarascus. 'The man is a barbarian, with the senseless ferocity of a wounded tiger. Let me summon the archers.'____'Watch me and learn wisdom,' advised Xaltotun.____His hand dipped into his robe and came out with something shining - a glistening sphere. This he threw suddenly at Conan. The Cimmerian contemptuously struck it aside with his sword - at the instant of contact there was a sharp explosion, a flare of white, blinding flame, and Conan pitched senseless to the ground.____'He is dead?' Tarascus' tone was more assertion than inquiry.____'No. He is but senseless. He will recover his senses in a few hours. Bid your men bind his arms and legs and lift him into my chariot.'____With a gesture Tarascus did so, and they heaved the senseless king into the chariot, grunting with their burden. Xaltotun threw a velvet cloak over his body, completely covering him from any who might peer in. He gathered the reins in his hands.____'I'm for Belverus,' he said. 'Tell Amalric that I will be with him if he needs me. But with Conan out of the way, and his army broken, lance and sword should suffice for the rest of the conquest. Prospero cannot be bringing more than ten thousand men to the field, and will doubtless fall back to Tarantia when he hears the news of the battle. Say nothing to Amalric or Valerius or anyone about our capture. Let them think Conan died in the fall of the cliffs.'____He looked at the man-at-arms for a long space, until the guardsman moved restlessly, nervous under the scrutiny.____'What is that about your waist?' Xaltotun demanded.____'Why, my girdle, may it please you, my lord!' stuttered the amazed guardsman.____'You lie!' Xaltotun's laugh was merciless as a sword-edge. 'It is a poisonous serpent! What a fool you are, to wear a reptile about your waist!'____With distended eyes the man looked down; and to his utter horror he saw the buckle of his girdle rear up at him. It was a snake's head! He saw the evil eyes and the dripping fangs, heard the hiss and felt the loathsome contact of the thing about his body. He screamed hideously and struck at it with his naked hand, felt its fangs flesh themselves in that hand - and then he stiffened and fell heavily. Tarascus looked down at him without expression. He saw only the leathern girdle and the buckle, the pointed tongue of which was stuck in the guardsman's palm. Xaltotun turned his hypnotic gaze on Tarascus' squire, and the man turned ashen and began to tremble, but the king interposed: 'Nay, we can trust him.'____The sorcerer tautened the reins and swung the horses around.____'See that this piece of work remains secret. If I am needed, let Altaro, Orastes' servant, summon me as I have taught him. I will be in your palace at Belverus.'____Tarascus lifted his hand in salutation, but his expression was not pleasant to see as he looked after the departing mesmerist.____'Why should he spare the Cimmerian?' whispered the frightened squire.____'That I am wondering myself,' grunted Tarascus.____Behind the rumbling chariot the dull roar of battle and pursuit faded in the distance; the setting sun rimmed the cliffs with scarlet flame, and the chariot moved into the vast blue shadows floating up out of the east._____4 'From What Hell

Have You Crawled?' _____Of that long ride in the chariot of Xaltotun, Conan knew nothing. He lay like a dead man while the bronze wheels clashed over the stones of mountain roads and swished through the deep grass of fertile valleys, and finally dropping down from the rugged heights, rumbled rhythmically along the broad white road that winds through the rich meadowlands to the walls of Belverus.____Just before dawn some faint reviving of life touched him. He heard a mumble of voices, the groan of ponderous hinges. Through a slit in the cloak that covered him he saw, faintly in the lurid glare of torches, the great black arch of a gateway, and the bearded faces of men-at-arms, the torches striking fire from their spearheads and helmets.____'How went the battle, my fair lord?' spoke an eager voice, in the Nemedian tongue.____'Well indeed,' was the curt reply. 'The king of Aquilonia lies slain and his host is broken.'____A babble of excited voices rose, drowned the next instant by the whirling wheels of the chariot on the flags. Sparks flashed from under the revolving rims as Xaltotun lashed his steeds through the arch. But Conan heard one of the guardsmen mutter: 'From beyond the border to Belverus between sunset and dawn! And the horses scarcely sweating! By Mitra, they?' Then silence drank the voices, and there was only the clatter of hoofs and wheels along the shadowy street.____What he had heard registered itself on Conan's brain but suggested nothing to him. He was like a mindless automaton that hears and sees, but does not understand. Sights and sounds flowed meaninglessly about him. He lapsed again into a deep lethargy, and was only dimly aware when the chariot halted in a deep, high-walled court, and he was lifted from it by many hands and borne up a winding stone stair, and down a long dim corridor. Whispers, stealthy footsteps, unrelated sounds surged or rustled about him, irrelevant and far away.____Yet his ultimate awakening was abrupt and crystal-clear. He possessed full knowledge of the battle in the mountains and its sequences, and he had a good idea of where he was.____He lay on a velvet couch, clad as he was the day before, but with his limbs loaded with chains not even he could break. The room in which he lay was furnished with somber magnificence, the walls covered with black velvet tapestries, the floor with heavy purple carpets. There was no sign of door or window, and one curiously carved gold lamp, swinging from the fretted ceiling, shed a lurid light over all.____In that light the figure seated in a silver, throne-like chair before him seemed unreal and fantastic, with an illusiveness of outline that was heightened by a filmy silken robe. But the features were distinct - unnaturally so in that uncertain light. It was almost as if a weird nimbus played about the man's head, casting the bearded face into bold relief, so that it was the only definite and distinct reality in that mystic, ghostly chamber.____It was a magnificent face, with strongly chiseled features of classical beauty. There was, indeed, something disquieting about the calm tranquility of its aspect, a suggestion of more than human knowledge, of a profound certitude beyond human assurance. Also an uneasy sensation of familiarity twitched at the back of Conan's consciousness. He had never seen this man's face before, he well knew; yet those features reminded him of something or someone. It was like encountering in the flesh some dream-image that had haunted one in nightmares.____'Who are you?' demanded the king belligerently, struggling to a sitting position in spite of his chains.____'Men call me Xaltotun,' was the reply, in a strong, golden voice.____'What place is this?' the Cimmerian next demanded.____'A chamber in the palace of King Tarascus, in Belverus.'____Conan was not surprised. Belverus, the capital, was at the same time the largest Nemedian city so near the

border.____'And where's Tarascus?'____'With the army.'____'Well,' growled Conan, 'if you mean to murder me, why don't you do it and get it over with?'____'I did not save you from the king's archers to murder you in Belverus,' answered Xaltotun.____'What the devil did you do to me?' demanded Conan. 'I blasted your consciousness,' answered Xaltotun. 'How, you would not understand. Call it black magic, if you will.'____Conan had already reached that conclusion, and was mulling over something else.____'I think I understand why you spared my life,' he rumbled. 'Amalric wants to keep me as a check on Valerius, in case the impossible happens and he becomes king of Aquilonia. It's well known that the baron of Tor is behind this move to seat Valerius on my throne. And if I know Amalric, he doesn't intend that Valerius shall be anything more than a figurehead, as Tarascus is now.'____'Amalric knows nothing of your capture,' answered Xaltotun. 'Neither does Valerius. Both think you died at Valkia.' Conan's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man in silence. 'I sensed a brain behind all this,' he muttered, 'but I thought it was Amalric's. Are Amalric, Tarascus and Valerius all but puppets dancing on your string? Who are you?'____'What does it matter? If I told you, you would not believe me. What if I told you I might set you back on the throne of Aquilonia?'____Conan's eyes burned on him like a wolf. 'What's your price?' 'Obedience to me.'____'Go to hell with your offer!' snarled Conan. 'I'm no figurehead. I won my crown with my sword. Besides, it's beyond your power to buy and sell the throne of Aquilonia at your will. The kingdom's not conquered; one battle doesn't decide a war.'____'You war against more than swords,' answered Xaltotun. 'Was it a mortal's sword that felled you in your tent before the fight? Nay, it was a child of the dark, a waif of outer space, whose fingers were afire with the frozen coldness of the black gulfs, which froze the blood in your veins and the marrow of your thews. Coldness so cold it burned your flesh like white-hot iron! 'Was it chance that led the man who wore your harness to lead his knights into the defile? - chance that brought the cliffs crashing down upon them?'____Conan glared at him unspeaking, feeling a chill along his spine. Wizards and sorcerers abounded in his barbaric mythology, and any fool could tell that this was no common man. Conan sensed an inexplicable something about him that set him apart - an alien aura of Time and Space, a sense of tremendous and sinister antiquity. But his stubborn spirit refused to flinch.____'The fall of the cliffs was chance,' he muttered truculently. 'The charge into the defile was what any man would have done.' 'Not so. You would not have led a charge into it. You would have suspected a trap. You would never have crossed the river in the first place, until you were sure the Nemedian rout was real. Hypnotic suggestions would not have invaded your mind, even in the madness of battle, to make you mad, and rush blindly into the trap laid for you, as it did the lesser man who masqueraded as you.'____'Then if this was all planned,' Conan grunted skeptically, 'all a plot to trap my host, why did not the "child of darkness" kill me in my tent?'____'Because I wished to take you alive. It took no wizardry to predict that Pallantides would send another man out in your harness. I wanted you alive and unhurt. You may fit into my scheme of things. There is a vital power about you greater than the craft and cunning of my allies. You are a bad enemy, but might make a fine vassal.'____Conan spat savagely at the word, and Xaltotun, ignoring his fury, took a crystal globe from a near-by table and placed it before him. He did not support it in any way, nor place it on anything, but it hung motionless in midair, as solidly as if it rested on an iron pedestal. Conan snorted at this bit of necromancy, but he was nevertheless

impressed. ___'Would you know of what goes on in Aquilonia?' he asked. ___Conan did not reply, but the sudden rigidity of his form betrayed his interest. ___Xaltotun stared into the cloudy depths, and spoke: 'It is now the evening of the day after the battle of Valkia. Last night the main body of the army camped by Valkia, while squadrons of knights harried the fleeing Aquilonians. At dawn the host broke camp and pushed westward through the mountains. Prospero, with ten thousand Poitanians, was miles from the battlefield when he met the fleeing survivors in the early dawn. He had pushed on all night, hoping to reach the field before the battle joined. Unable to rally the remnants of the broken host, he fell back toward Tarantia. Riding hard, replacing his wearied horses with steeds seized from the countryside, he approaches Tarantia. ___'I see his weary knights, their armor gray with dust, their pennons drooping as they push their tired horses through the plain. I see, also, the streets of Tarantia. The city is in turmoil. Somehow word has reached the people of the defeat and the death of King Conan. The mob is mad with fear, crying out that the king is dead, and there is none to lead them against the Nemedians. Giant shadows rush on Aquilonia from the east, and the sky is black with vultures.' Conan cursed deeply. ___'What are these but words? The raggedest beggar in the street might prophesy as much. If you say you saw all that in the glass ball, then you're a liar as well as a knave, of which last there's no doubt! Prospero will hold Tarantia, and the barons will rally to him. Count Trocero of Poitain commands the kingdom in my absence, and he'll drive these Nemedian dogs howling back to their kennels. What are fifty thousand Nemedians? Aquilonia will swallow them up. They'll never see Bel-verus again. It's not Aquilonia which was conquered at Valkia; it was only Conan.' ___'Aquilonia is doomed,' answered Xaltotun, unmoved. 'Lance and ax and torch shall conquer her; or if they fail, powers from the dark of ages shall march against her. As the cliffs fell at Valkia, so shall walled cities and mountains fall, if the need arise, and rivers roar from their channels to drown whole provinces. ___'Better if steel and bowstring prevail without further aid from the arts, for the constant use of mighty spells sometimes sets forces in motion that might rock the universe.' ___'From what hell have you crawled, you nighted dog?' muttered Conan, staring at the man. The Cimmerian involuntarily shivered; he sensed something incredibly ancient, incredibly evil. ___Xaltotun lifted his head, as if listening to whispers across the void. He seemed to have forgotten his prisoner. Then he shook his head impatiently, and glanced impersonally at Conan. ___'What? Why, if I told you, you would not believe me. But I am wearied of conversation with you; it is less fatiguing to destroy a walled city than it is to frame my thoughts in words a brainless barbarian can understand.' ___'If my hands were free,' opined Conan, 'I'd soon make a brainless corpse out of you.' ___'I do not doubt it, if I were fool enough to give you the opportunity,' answered Xaltotun, clapping his hands. ___His manner had changed; there was impatience in his tone, and a certain nervousness in his manner, though Conan did not think this attitude was in any way connected with himself. ___'Consider what I have told you, barbarian,' said Xaltotun. 'You will have plenty of leisure. I have not yet decided what I shall do with you. It depends on circumstances yet unborn. But let this be impressed upon you: that if I decide to use you in my game, it will be better to submit without resistance than to suffer my wrath.' ___Conan spat a curse at him, just as hangings that masked a door swung apart and four giant negroes entered. Each was clad only in a silken breech-clout supported by a girdle, from which hung a

great key. ___Xaltotun gestured impatiently toward the king and turned away, as if dismissing the matter entirely from his mind. His fingers twitched queerly. From a carven green jade box he took a handful of shimmering black dust, and placed it in a brazier which stood on a golden tripod at his elbow. The crystal globe, which he seemed to have forgotten, fell suddenly to the floor, as if its invisible support had been removed. ___Then the blacks had lifted Conan - for so loaded with chains was he that he could not walk - and carried him from the chamber. A glance back, before the heavy, gold-bound teak door was closed, showed him Xaltotun leaning back in his throne-like chair, his arms folded, while a thin wisp of smoke curled up from the brazier. Conan's scalp prickled. In Stygia, that ancient and evil kingdom that lay far to the south, he had seen such black dust before. It was the pollen of the black lotus, which creates death-like sleep and monstrous dreams; and he knew that only the grisly wizards of the Black Ring, which is the nadir of evil, voluntarily seek the scarlet nightmares of the black lotus, to revive their necromantic powers. ___The Black Ring was a fable and a lie to most folk of the western world, but Conan knew of its ghastly reality, and its grim votaries who practise their abominable sorceries amid the black vaults of Stygia and the nighted domes of accursed Sabatea. ___He glanced back at the cryptic, gold-bound door, shuddering at what it hid. ___Whether it was day or night the king could not tell. The palace of King Tarascus seemed a shadowy, nighted place, that shunned natural illumination. The spirit of darkness and shadow hovered over it, and that spirit, Conan felt, was embodied in the stranger Xaltotun. The negroes carried the king along a winding corridor so dimly lighted that they moved through it like black ghosts bearing a dead man, and down a stone stair that wound endlessly. A torch in the hand of one cast the great deformed shadows streaming along the wall; it was like the descent into hell of a corpse borne by dusky demons. ___At last they reached the foot of the stair, and then they traversed a long straight corridor, with a blank wall on one hand pierced by an occasional arched doorway with a stair leading up behind it, and on the other hand another wall showing heavy barred doors at regular intervals of a few feet. ___Halting before one of these doors, one of the blacks produced the key that hung at his girdle, and turned it in the lock. Then, pushing open the grille, they entered with their captive. They were in a small dungeon with heavy stone walls, floor and ceiling, and in the opposite wall there was another grilled door. What lay beyond that door Conan could not tell, but he did not believe it was another corridor. The glimmering light of the torch, flickering through the bars, hinted at shadowy spaciousness and echoing depths. ___In one corner of the dungeon, near the door through which they had entered, a cluster of rusty chains hung from a great iron ring set in the stone. In these chains a skeleton dangled. Conan glared at it with some curiosity, noticing the state of the bare bones, most of which were splintered and broken; the skull which had fallen from the vertebrae, was crushed as if by some savage blow of tremendous force. ___Stolidly one of the blacks, not the one who had opened the door, removed the chains from the ring, using his key on the massive lock, and dragged the mass of rusty metal and shattered bones over to one side. Then they fastened Conan's chains to that ring, and the third black turned his key in the lock of the farther door, grunting when he had assured himself that it was properly fastened. ___Then they regarded Conan cryptically, slit-eyed ebony giants, the torch striking highlights from their glossy skin. ___He who held the key to the nearer door was moved to remark, gutturally: 'This your palace now, white dog-

king! None but master and we know. All palace sleep. We keep secret. You live and die here, maybe. Like him!' He contemptuously kicked the shattered skull and sent it clattering across the stone floor. Conan did not deign to reply to the taunt, and the black, galled perhaps by his prisoner's silence, muttered a curse, stooped and spat full in the king's face. It was an unfortunate move for the black. Conan was seated on the floor, the chains about his waist; ankles and wrists locked to the ring in the wall. He could neither rise, nor move more than a yard out from the wall. But there was considerable slack in the chains that shackled his wrists, and before the bullet-shaped head could be withdrawn out of reach, the king gathered this slack in his mighty hand and smote the black on the head. The man fell like a butchered ox, and his comrades stared to see him lying with his scalp laid open, and blood oozing from his nose and ears. But they attempted no reprisal, nor did they accept Conan's urgent invitation to approach within reach of the bloody chain in his hand. Presently, grunting in their ape-like speech, they lifted the senseless black and bore him out like a sack of wheat, arms and legs dangling. They used his key to lock the door behind them, but did not remove it from the gold chain that fastened it to his girdle. They took the torch with them, and as they moved up the corridor the darkness slunk behind them like an animate thing. Their soft padding footsteps died away, with the glimmer of their torch, and darkness and silence remained unchallenged. 5 The Haunter of the Pits Conan lay still, enduring the weight of his chains and the despair of his position with the stoicism of the wilds that had bred him. He did not move, because the jangle of his chains, when he shifted his body, sounded startlingly loud in the darkness and stillness, and it was his instinct, born of a thousand wilderness-bred ancestors, not to betray his position in his helplessness. This did not result from a logical reasoning process; he did not lie quiet because he reasoned that the darkness hid lurking dangers that might discover him in his helplessness. Xaltotun had assured him that he was not to be harmed, and Conan believed that it was in the man's interest to preserve him, at least for the time being. But the instincts of the wild were there, that had caused him in his childhood to lie hidden and silent while wild beasts prowled about his covert. Even his keen eyes could not pierce the solid darkness. Yet after a while, after a period of time he had no way of estimating, a faint glow became apparent, a sort of slanting gray beam, by which Conan could see, vaguely, the bars of the door at his elbow, and even make out the skeleton of the other grille. This puzzled him, until at last he realized the explanation. He was far below ground, in the pits below the palace; yet for some reason a shaft had been constructed from somewhere above. Outside, the moon had risen to a point where its light slanted dimly down the shaft. He reflected that in this manner he could tell the passing of the days and nights. Perhaps the sun, too, would shine down that shaft, though on the other hand it might be closed by day. Perhaps it was a subtle method of torture, allowing a prisoner but a glimpse of daylight or moonlight. His gaze fell on the broken bones in the farther corner, glimmering dimly. He did not tax his brain with futile speculation as to who the wretch had been and for what reason he had been doomed, but he wondered at the shattered condition of the bones. They had not been broken on a rack. Then, as he looked, another unsavory detail made itself evident. The shin-bones were split lengthwise, and there was but one explanation; they had been broken in that manner in order to obtain the marrow. Yet what creature but man breaks bones for their marrow? Perhaps those remnants were mute evidence of a horrible, cannibalistic

feast, of some wretch driven to madness by starvation. Conan wondered if his own bones would be found at some future date, hanging in their rusty chains. He fought down the unreasoning panic of a trapped wolf. The Cimmerian did not curse, scream, weep or rave as a civilized man might have done. But the pain and turmoil in his bosom were none the less fierce. His great limbs quivered with the intensity of his emotions. Somewhere, far to the westward, the Nemedian host was slashing and burning its way through the heart of his kingdom. The small host of the Poitanians could not stand before them. Prospero might be able to hold Tarantia for weeks, or months; but eventually, if not relieved, he must surrender to greater numbers. Surely the barons would rally to him against the invaders. But in the meanwhile he, Conan, must lie helpless in a darkened cell, while others led his spears and fought for his kingdom. The king ground his powerful teeth in red rage. Then he stiffened as outside the farther door he heard a stealthy step. Straining his eyes he made out a bent, indistinct figure outside the grille. There was a rasp of metal against metal, and he heard the clink of tumblers, as if a key had been turned in the lock. Then the figure moved silently out of his range of vision. Some guard, he supposed, trying the lock. After a while he heard the sound repeated faintly somewhere farther on, and that was followed by the soft opening of a door, and then a swift scurry of softly shod feet retreated in the distance. Then silence fell again. Conan listened for what seemed a long time, but which could not have been, for the moon still shone down the hidden shaft, but he heard no further sound. He shifted his position at last, and his chains clanked. Then he heard another, lighter footfall - a soft step outside the nearer door, the door through which he had entered the cell. An instant later a slender figure was etched dimly in the gray light. 'King Conan!' a soft voice intoned urgently. 'Oh, my lord, are you there?' 'Where else?' he answered guardedly, twisting his head about to stare at the apparition. It was a girl who stood grasping the bars with her slender fingers. The dim glow behind her outlined her supple figure through the wisp of silk twisted about her loins, and shone vaguely on jeweled breast-plates. Her dark eyes gleamed in the shadows, her white limbs glistened softly, like alabaster. Her hair was a mass of dark foam, at the burnished luster of which the dim light only hinted. 'The keys to your shackles and to the farther door!' she whispered, and a slim white hand came through the bars and dropped three objects with a clink to the flags beside him. 'What game is this?' he demanded. 'You speak in the Nemedian tongue, and I have no friends in Nemedian. What deviltry is your master up to now? Has he sent you here to mock me?' 'It is no mockery!' The girl was trembling violently. Her bracelets and breast-plates clinked against the bars she grasped. 'I swear by Mitra! I stole the keys from the black jailers. They are the keepers of the pits, and each bears a key which will open only one set of locks. I made them drunk. The one whose head you broke was carried away to a leech, and I could not get his key. But the others I stole. Oh, please do not loiter! Beyond these dungeons lie the pits which are the doors to hell.' Somewhat impressed, Conan tried the keys dubiously, expecting to meet only failure and a burst of mocking laughter. But he was galvanized to discover that one, indeed, loosed him of his shackles, fitting not only the lock that held them to the ring, but the locks on his limbs as well. A few seconds later he stood upright, exulting fiercely in his comparative freedom. A quick stride carried him to the grille, and his fingers closed about a bar and the slender wrist that was pressed against it, imprisoning the

owner, who lifted her face bravely to his fierce gaze.____'Who are you, girl?' he demanded. 'Why do you do this?'____'I am only Zenobia,' she murmured, with a catch of breath-lessness, as if in fright; 'only a girl of the king's seraglio.'____'Unless this is some cursed trick,' muttered Conan, 'I cannot see why you bring me these keys.'____She bowed her dark head, and then lifted it and looked full into his suspicious eyes. Tears sparkled like jewels on her long dark lashes.____'I am only a girl of the king's seraglio,' she said, with a certain proud humility. 'He has never glanced at me, and probably never will. I am less than one of the dogs that gnaw the bones in his banquet hall.____'But I am no painted toy; I am of flesh and blood. I breathe, hate, fear, rejoice and love. And I have loved you, King Conan, ever since I saw you riding at the head of your knights along the streets of Belverus when you visited King Nimed, years ago. My heart tugged at its strings to leap from my bosom and fall in the dust of the street under your horse's hoofs.'____Color flooded her countenance as she spoke, but her dark eyes did not waver. Conan did not at once reply; wild and passionate and untamed he was, yet any but the most brutish of men must be touched with a certain awe or wonder at the baring of a woman's naked soul.____She bent her head then, and pressed her red lips to the fingers that imprisoned her slim wrist. Then she flung up her head as if in sudden recollection of their position, and terror flared in her dark eyes.____'Haste!' she whispered urgently. 'It is past midnight. You must be gone.'____'But won't they skin you alive for stealing these keys?'____'They'll never know. If the black men remember in the morning who gave them the wine, they will not dare admit the keys were stolen from them while they were drunk. The key that I could not obtain is the one that unlocks this door. You must make your way to freedom through the pits. What awful perils lurk beyond that door I cannot even guess. But greater danger lurks for you if you remain in this cell.____'King Tarascus has returned?'____'What? Tarascus?'____'Aye! He has returned, in great secrecy, and not long ago he descended into the pits and then came out again, pale and shaking, like a man who had dared a great hazard. I heard him whisper to his squire, Arideus, that despite Xaltotun you should die.'____'What of Xaltotun?' murmured Conan.____He felt her shudder.____'Do not speak of him!' she whispered. 'Demons are often summoned by the sound of their names. The slaves say that he lies in his chamber, behind a bolted door, dreaming the dreams of the black lotus. I believe that even Tarascus secretly fears him, or he would slay you openly. But he has been in the pits tonight, and what he did here, only Mitra knows.'____'I wonder if that could have been Tarascus who fumbled at my cell door awhile ago?' muttered Conan.____'Here is a dagger!' she whispered, pressing something through the bars. His eager fingers closed on an object familiar to their touch. 'Go quickly through yonder door, turn to the left and make your way along the cells until you come to a stone stair. On your life do not stray from the line of the cells! Climb the stair and open the door at the top; one of the keys will fit it. If it be the will of Mitra, I will await you there.' Then she was gone, with a patter of light slippered feet.____Conan shrugged his shoulders, and turned toward the farther grille. This might be some diabolical trap planned by Tarascus, but plunging headlong into a snare was less abhorrent to Conan's temperament than sitting meekly to await his doom. He inspected the weapon the girl had given him, and smiled grimly. Whatever else she might be, she was proven by that dagger to be a person of practical intelligence. It was no slender stiletto, selected because of a jeweled hilt or gold guard, fitted only for dainty murder in milady's boudoir;

it was a forthright poniard, a warrior's weapon, broad-bladed, fifteen inches in length, tapering to a diamond-sharp point. He grunted with satisfaction. The feel of the hilt cheered him and gave him a glow of confidence. Whatever webs of conspiracy were drawn about him, whatever trickery and treachery ensnared him, this knife was real. The great muscles of his right arm swelled in anticipation of murderous blows. He tried the farther door, fumbling with the keys as he did so. It was not locked. Yet he remembered the black man locking it. That furtive, bent figure, then, had been no jailer seeing that the bolts were in place. He had unlocked the door, instead. There was a sinister suggestion about that unlocked door. But Conan did not hesitate. He pushed upon the grille and stepped from the dungeon into the outer darkness. As he had thought, the door did not open into another corridor. The flagged floor stretched away under his feet, and the line of cells ran away to the right and left behind him, but he could not make out the other limits of the place into which he had come. He could see neither the roof nor any other wall. The moonlight filtered into that vastness only through the grilles of the cells, and was almost lost in the darkness. Less keen eyes than his could scarcely have discerned the dim gray patches that floated before each cell door. Turning to the left, he moved swiftly and noiselessly along the line of dungeons, his bare feet making no sound on the flags. He glanced briefly into each dungeon as he passed it. They were all empty, but locked. In some he caught the glimmer of naked white bones. These pits were a relic of a grimmer age, constructed long ago when Belverus was a fortress rather than a city. But evidently their more recent use had been more extensive than the world guessed. Ahead of him, presently, he saw the dim outline of a stair sloping sharply upward, and knew it must be the stair he sought. Then he whirled suddenly, crouching in the deep shadows at its foot. Somewhere behind him something was moving - something bulky and stealthy that padded on feet which were not human feet. He was looking down the long row of cells, before each one of which lay a square of dim gray light that was little more than a patch of less dense darkness. But he saw something moving along these squares. What it was he could not tell, but it was heavy and huge, and yet it moved with more than human ease and swiftness. He glimpsed it as it moved across the squares of gray, then lost it as it merged in the expanses of shadow between. It was uncanny, in its stealthy advance, appearing and disappearing like a blur of the vision. He heard the bars rattle as it tried each door in turn. Now it had reached the cell he had so recently quitted, and the door swung open as it tugged. He saw a great bulky shape limned faintly and briefly in the gray doorway, and then the thing had vanished into the dungeon. Sweat beaded Conan's face and hands. Now he knew why Tarascus had come so subtly to his door, and later had fled so swiftly. The king had unlocked his door, and, somewhere in these hellish pits, had opened a cell or cage that held some grim monstrosity. Now the thing was emerging from the cell and was again advancing up the corridor, its misshapen head close to the ground. It paid no more heed to the locked doors. It was smelling out his trail. He saw it more plainly now; the gray light limned a giant anthropomorphic body, but vaster of bulk and girth than any man. It went on two legs, though it stooped forward, and it was grayish and shaggy, its thick coat shot with silver. Its head was a grisly travesty of the human, its long arms hung nearly to the ground. Conan knew it at last - understood the meaning of those crushed and broken bones in the dungeon, and recognized the hunter of the pits. It was a gray ape, one of the grisly man-eaters from the

forests that wave on the mountainous eastern shores of the Sea of Vilayet. Half mythical and altogether horrible, these apes were the goblins of Hyborian legendry, and were in reality ogres of the natural world, cannibals and murderers of the nighted forests. ___He knew it scented his presence, for it was coming swiftly now, rolling its barrel-like body rapidly along on its short, mighty bowed legs. He cast a quick glance up the long stair, but knew that the thing would be on his back before he could mount to the distant door. He chose to meet it face to face. ___Conan stepped out into the nearest square of moonlight, so as to have all the advantage of illumination that he could; for the beast, he knew, could see better than himself in the dark. Instantly the brute saw him; its great yellow tusks gleamed in the shadows, but it made no sound. Creatures of night and the silence, the gray apes of Vilayet were voiceless. But in its dim, hideous features, which were a bestial travesty of a human face, showed ghastly exultation. ___Conan stood poised, watching the oncoming monster without a quiver. He knew he must stake his life on one thrust; there would be no chance for another; nor would there be time to strike and spring away. The first blow must kill, and kill instantly, if he hoped to survive that awful grapple. He swept his gaze over the short, squat throat, the hairy swagbelly, and the mighty breast, swelling in giant arches like twin shields. It must be the heart; better to risk the blade being deflected by the heavy ribs than to strike in where a stroke was not instantly fatal. With full realization of the odds, Conan matched his speed of eye and hand and his muscular power against the brute might and ferocity of the man-eater. He must meet the brute breast to breast, strike a death-blow, and then trust to the ruggedness of his frame to survive the instant of manhandling that was certain to be his. ___As the ape came rolling in on him, swinging wide its terrible arms, he plunged in between them and struck with all his desperate power. He felt the blade sink to the hilt in the hairy breast, and instantly, releasing it, he ducked his head and bunched his whole body into one compact mass of knotted muscles, and as he did so he grasped the closing arms and drove his knee fiercely into the monster's belly, bracing himself against that crushing grapple. ___For one dizzy instant he felt as if he were being dismembered in the grip of an earthquake; then suddenly he was free, sprawling on the floor, and the monster was gasping out its life beneath him, its red eyes turned upward, the hilt of the poniard quivering in its breast. His desperate stab had gone home. ___Conan was panting as if after long conflict, trembling in every limb. Some of his joints felt as if they had been dislocated, and blood dripped from scratches on his skin where the monster's talons had ripped; his muscles and tendons had been savagely wrenched and twisted. If the beast had lived a second longer, it would surely have dismembered him. But the Cimmerian's mighty strength had resisted, for the fleeting instant it had endured, the dying convulsion of the ape that would have torn a lesser man limb from limb. _____6 The Thrust of a Knife _____ Conan stooped and tore the knife from the monster's breast. Then he went swiftly up the stair. What other shapes of fear the darkness held he could not guess, but he had no desire to encounter any more. This touch-and-go sort of battling was too strenuous even for the giant Cimmerian. The moonlight was fading from the floor, the darkness closing in, and something like panic pursued him up the stair. He breathed a gusty sigh of relief when he reached the head, and felt the third key turn in the lock. He opened the door slightly, and craned his neck to peer through, half expecting an attack from some human or bestial enemy. ___He looked into a bare stone corridor, dimly lighted,

and a slender, supple figure stood before the door.____'Your Majesty!' It was a low, vibrant cry, half in relief and half in fear. The girl sprang to his side, then hesitated as if abashed.____'You bleed,' she said. 'You have been hurt!' He brushed aside the implication with an impatient hand. 'Scratches that wouldn't hurt a baby. Your skewer came in handy, though. But for it Tarascus' monkey would be cracking my shin-bones for the marrow right now. But what now?'____'Follow me,' she whispered. 'I will lead you outside the city wall. I have a horse concealed there.'____She turned to lead the way down the corridor, but he laid a heavy hand on her naked shoulder.____'Walk beside me,' he instructed her softly, passing his massive arm about her lithe waist. 'You've played me fair so far, and I'm inclined to believe in you; but I've lived this long only because I've trusted no one too far, man or woman. So! Now if you play me false you won't live to enjoy the jest.'____She did not flinch at sight of the reddened poniard or the contact of his hard muscles about her supple body.____'Cut me down without mercy if I play you false,' she answered. 'The very feel of your arm about me, even in menace is as the fulfillment of a dream.'____The vaulted corridor ended at a door, which she opened. Outside lay another black man, a giant in turban and silk loincloth, with a curved sword lying on the flags near his hand. He did not move.____'I drugged his wine,' she whispered, swerving to avoid the recumbent figure. 'He is the last, and outer, guard of the pits. None ever escaped from them before, and none has ever wished to seek them; so only these black men guard them. Only these of all the servants knew it was King Conan that Xaltotun brought a prisoner in his chariot. I was watching, sleepless, from an upper casement that opened into the court, while the other girls slept; for I knew that a battle was being fought, or had been fought, in the west, and I feared for you ...'____'I saw the blacks carry you up the stair, and I recognized you in the torchlight. I slipped into this wing of the palace tonight, in time to see them carry you to the pits. I had not dared come here before nightfall. You must have lain in drugged senselessness all day in Xaltotun's chamber.____'Oh, let us be wary! Strange things are afoot in the palace tonight. The slaves said that Xaltotun slept as he often sleeps, drugged by the lotus of Stygia, but Tarascus is in the palace. He entered secretly, through the postern, wrapped in his cloak which was dusty as with long travel, and attended only by his squire, the lean silent Arideus. I cannot understand, but I am afraid.'____They came out at the foot of a narrow, winding stair, and mounting it, passed through a narrow panel which she slid aside. When they had passed through, she slipped it back in place, and it became merely a portion of the ornate wall. They were in a more spacious corridor, carpeted and tapestried, over which hanging lamps shed a golden glow.____Conan listened intently, but he heard no sound throughout the palace. He did not know in what part of the palace he was, or in which direction lay the chamber of Xaltotun. The girl was trembling as she drew him along the corridor, to halt presently beside an alcove masked with satin tapestry. Drawing this aside, she motioned for him to step into the niche, and whispered: 'Wait here! Beyond that door at the end of the corridor we are likely to meet slaves or eunuchs at any time of the day or night. I will go and see if the way is clear, before we essay it.'____Instantly his hair-trigger suspicions were aroused.____'Are you leading me into a trap?'____Tears sprang into her dark eyes. She sank to her knees and seized his muscular hand.____'Oh, my king, do not mistrust me now!' Her voice shook with desperate urgency. 'If you doubt and hesitate, we are lost! Why should I bring you up out of the pits to

betray you now?'___'All right,' he muttered. 'I'll trust you; though, by Crom, the habits of a lifetime are not easily put aside. Yet I wouldn't harm you now, if you brought all the swordsmen in Nemedias upon me. But for you Tarascus' cursed ape would have come upon me in chains and unarmed. Do as you wish, girl.'___Kissing his hands, she sprang lithely up and ran down the corridor, to vanish through a heavy double door.___He glanced after her, wondering if he was a fool to trust her; then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and pulled the satin hangings together, masking his refuge. It was not strange that a passionate young beauty should be risking her life to aid him; such things had happened often enough in his life. Many women had looked on him with favor, in the days of his wanderings, and in the time of his kingship.___Yet he did not remain motionless in the alcove, waiting for her return. Following his instincts, he explored the niche for another exit, and presently found one - the opening of a narrow passage, masked by the tapestries, that ran to an ornately carved door, barely visible in the dim light that filtered in from the outer corridor. And as he stared into it, somewhere beyond that carved door he heard the sound of another door opening and shutting, and then a low mumble of voices. The familiar sound of one of those voices caused a sinister expression to cross his dark face. Without hesitation he glided down the passage, and crouched like a stalking panther beside the door. It was not locked, and manipulating it delicately, he pushed it open a crack, with a reckless disregard for possible consequences that only he could have explained or defended.___It was masked on the other side by tapestries, but through a thin slit in the velvet he looked into a chamber lit by a candle on an ebony table. There were two men in that chamber. One was a scarred, sinister-looking ruffian in leather breeks and ragged cloak; the other was Tarascus, king of Nemedias.___Tarascus seemed ill at ease. He was slightly pale, and he kept starting and glancing about him, as if expecting and fearing to hear some sound or footstep.___'Go swiftly and at once,' he was saying. 'He is deep in drugged slumber, but I know not when he may awaken.'___'Strange to hear words of fear issuing from the lips of Tarascus,' rumbled the other in a harsh, deep voice.___The king frowned.___'I fear no common man, as you well know. But when I saw the cliffs fall at Valkia I knew that this devil we had resurrected was no charlatan. I fear his powers, because I do not know the full extent of them. But I know that somehow they are connected with this accursed thing which I have stolen from him. It brought him back to life; so it must be the source of his sorcery.___'He had it hidden well; but following my secret order a slave spied on him and saw him place it in a golden chest, and saw where he hid the chest. Even so, I would not have dared steal it had Xaltotun himself not been sunk in lotus slumber.___'I believe it is the secret of his power. With it Orastes brought him back to life. With it he will make us all slaves, if we are not wary. So take it and cast it into the sea as I have bidden you. And be sure you are so far from land that neither tide nor storm can wash it up on the beach. You have been paid.'___'So I have,' grunted the ruffian. 'And I owe more than gold to you, king; I owe you a debt of gratitude. Even thieves can be grateful.'___'Whatever debt you may feel you owe me,' answered Tarascus, 'will be paid when you have hurled this thing into the sea.'___'I'll ride for Zingara and take ship from Kordava,' promised the other. 'I dare not show my head in Argos, because of the matter of a murder or so?'___'I care not, so it is done. Here it is; a horse awaits you in the court. Go, and go swiftly!'___Something passed between them, something that flamed like living fire. Conan had only a brief glimpse of it; and then the ruffian

pulled a slouch hat over his eyes, drew his cloak about his shoulder, and hurried from the chamber. And as the door closed behind him, Conan moved with the devastating fury of unchained blood-lust. He had held himself in check so long as he could. The sight of his enemy so near him set his wild blood seething and swept away all caution and restraint. Tarascus was turning toward an inner door when Conan tore aside the hangings and leaped like a blood-mad panther into the room. Tarascus wheeled, but even before he could recognize his attacker, Conan's poniard ripped into him. But the blow was not mortal, as Conan knew the instant he struck. His foot had caught in a fold of the curtains and tripped him as he leaped. The point fleshed itself in Tarascus' shoulder and plowed down along his ribs, and the king of Nemedica screamed. The impact of the blow and Conan's lunging body hurled him back against the table and it toppled and the candle went out. They were both carried to the floor by the violence of Conan's rush, and the foot of the tapestry hampered them both in its folds. Conan was stabbing blindly in the dark, Tarascus screaming in a frenzy of panicky terror. As if fear lent him superhuman energy, Tarascus tore free and blundered away in the darkness, shrieking: 'Help! Guards! Arideus! Orastes! Orastes!' Conan rose, kicking himself free of the tangling tapestries and the broken table, cursing with the bitterness of his bloodthirsty disappointment. He was confused, and ignorant of the plan of the palace. The yells of Tarascus were still resounding in the distance, and a wild outcry was bursting forth in answer. The Nemedian had escaped him in the darkness, and Conan did not know which way he had gone. The Cimmerian's rash stroke for vengeance had failed, and there remained only the task of saving his own hide if he could. Swearing luridly, Conan ran back down the passage and into the alcove, glaring out into the lighted corridor, just as Zenobia came running up it, her dark eyes dilated with terror. 'Oh, what has happened?' she cried. 'The palace is roused! I swear I have not betrayed you?' 'No, it was I who stirred up this hornet's nest,' he grunted. 'I tried to pay off a score. What's the shortest way out of this?' She caught his wrist and ran fleetly down the corridor. But before they reached the heavy door at the other end, muffled shouts arose from behind it and the portals began to shake under an assault from the other side. Zenobia wrung her hands and whimpered. 'We are cut off! I locked that door as I returned through it. But they will burst it in a moment. The way to the postern gate lies through it.' Conan wheeled. Up the corridor, though still out of sight, he heard a rising clamor that told him his foes were behind as well as before him. 'Quick! Into this door!' the girl cried desperately, running across the corridor and throwing open the door of a chamber. Conan followed her through, and then threw the gold catch behind them. They stood in an ornately furnished chamber, empty but for themselves, and she drew him to a gold-barred window, through which he saw trees and shrubbery. 'You are strong,' she panted. 'If you can tear these bars away, you may yet escape. The garden is full of guards, but the shrubs are thick, and you may avoid them. The southern wall is also the outer wall of the city. Once over that, you have a chance to get away. A horse is hidden for you in a thicket beside the road that runs westward, a few hundred paces to the south of the fountain of Thrallos. You know where it is?' 'Aye! But what of you? I had meant to take you with me.' A flood of joy lighted her beautiful face. 'Then my cup of happiness is brimming! But I will not hamper your escape. Burdened with me you would fail. Nay, do not fear for me. They will never suspect that I aided you willingly. Go! What you have

just said will glorify my life throughout the long years.'___He caught her up in his iron arms, crushed her slim, vibrant figure to him and kissed her fiercely on eyes, cheeks, throat and lips, until she lay panting in his embrace; gusty and tempestuous as a storm-wind, even his love-making was violent.___'I'll go,' he muttered. 'But by Crom, I'll come for you some day!''___Wheeling, he gripped the gold bars and tore them from their sockets with one tremendous wrench; threw a leg over the sill and went down swiftly, clinging to the ornaments on the wall. He hit the ground running and melted like a shadow into the maze of towering rose-bushes and spreading trees. The one look he cast back over his shoulder showed him Zenobia leaning over the window-sill, her arms stretched after him in mute farewell and renunciation.___Guards were running through the garden, all converging toward the palace, where the clamor momentarily grew louder - tall men in burnished cuirasses and crested helmets of polished bronze. The starlight struck glints from their gleaming armor, among the trees, betraying their every movement; but the sound of their coming ran far before them. To Conan, wilderness-bred, their rush through the shrubbery was like the blundering stampede of cattle. Some of them passed within a few feet of where he lay flat in a thick cluster of bushes, and never guessed his presence. With the palace as their goal, they were oblivious to all else about them. When they had gone shouting on, he rose and fled through the garden with no more noise than a panther would have made.___So quickly he came to the southern wall, and mounted the steps that led to the parapet. The wall was made to keep people out, not in. No sentry patrolling the battlements was in sight. Crouching by an embrasure he glanced back at the great palace rearing above the cypresses behind him. Lights blazed from every window, and he could see figures flitting back and forth across them like puppets on invisible strings. He grinned hardly, shook his fist in a gesture of farewell and menace, and let himself over the outer rim of the parapet.___A low tree, a few yards below the parapet, received Conan's weight, as he dropped noiselessly into the branches. An instant later he was racing through the shadows with the swinging hillman's stride that eats up long miles.___Gardens and pleasure villas surrounded the walls of Belverus. Drowsy slaves, sleeping by their watchman's pikes, did not see the swift and furtive figure that scaled walls, crossed alleys made by the arching branches of trees, and threaded a noiseless way through orchards and vineyards. Watchdogs woke and lifted their deep-booming clamor at a gliding shadow, half scented, half sensed, and then it was gone.___In a chamber of the palace Tarascus writhed and cursed on a blood-spattered couch, under the deft, quick fingers of Orastes. The palace was thronged with wide-eyed, trembling servitors, but the chamber where the king lay was empty save for himself and the renegade priest.___'Are you sure he still sleeps?' Tarascus demanded again, setting his teeth against the bite of the herb juices with which Orastes was bandaging the long, ragged gash in his shoulder and ribs. 'Ishtar, Mitra and Set! That burns like molten pitch of hell!''___'Which you would be experiencing even now, but for your good fortune,' remarked Orastes. 'Whoever wielded that knife struck to kill. Yes, I have told you that Xaltotun still sleeps. Why are you so urgent upon that point? What has he to do with this?''___'You know nothing of what has passed in the palace tonight?' Tarascus searched the priest's countenance with burning intensity.___'Nothing. As you know, I have been employed in translating manuscripts for Xaltotun, for some months now, transcribing esoteric volumes written in the younger languages into script he can read. He was well versed in all the tongues and

scripts of his day, but he has not yet learned all the newer languages, and to save time he has me translate these works for him, to learn if any new knowledge has been discovered since his time. I did not know that he had returned last night until he sent for me and told me of the battle. Then I returned to my studies, nor did I know that you had returned until the clamor in the palace brought me out of my cell.'___'Then you do not know that Xaltotun brought the king of Aquilonia a captive to this palace?'^___Orastes shook his head, without particular surprise.'___Xaltotun merely said that Conan would oppose us no more. I supposed that he had fallen, but did not ask the details.'___'Xaltotun saved his life when I would have slain him,' snarled Tarascus. 'I saw his purpose instantly. He would hold Conan captive to use as a club against us - against Amalric, against Valerius, and against myself. So long as Conan lives he is a threat, a unifying factor for Aquilonia, that might be used to compel us into courses we would not otherwise follow. I mistrust this undead Pythonian. Of late I have begun to fear him.'___'I followed him, some hours after he had departed eastward. I wished to learn what he intended doing with Conan. I found that he had imprisoned him in the pits. I intended to see that the barbarian died, in spite of Xaltotun. And I accomplished? A cautious knock sounded at the door. 'That's Arideus,' grunted Tarascus. 'Let him in.' The saturnine squire entered, his eyes blazing with suppressed excitement.'___'How, Arideus?' exclaimed Tarascus. 'Have you found the man who attacked me?''___'You did not see him, my lord?' asked Arideus, as one who would assure himself of a fact he already knows to exist. 'You did not recognize him?''___'No. It happened so quick, and the candle was out - all I could think of was that it was some devil loosed on me by Xaltotun's magic?''___'The Pythonian sleeps in his barred and bolted room. But I have been in the pits.' Arideus twitched his lean shoulders excitedly.'___'Well, speak, man!' exclaimed Tarascus impatiently. 'What did you find there?''___'An empty dungeon,' whispered the squire. 'The corpse of the great ape!''___'What?' Tarascus started upright, and blood gushed from his opened wound.'___'Aye! The man-eater is dead - stabbed through the heart -and Conan is gone!''___Tarascus was gray of face as he mechanically allowed Orastes to force him prostrate again and the priest renewed work upon his mangled flesh.'___'Conan!' he repeated. 'Not a crushed corpse - escaped! Mitra! He is no man; but a devil himself! I thought Xaltotun was behind this wound. I see now. Gods and devils! It was Conan who stabbed me! Arideus!' 'Aye, your Majesty!''___'Search every nook in the palace. He may be skulking through the dark corridors now like a hungry tiger. Let no niche escape your scrutiny, and beware. It is not a civilized man you hunt, but a blood-mad barbarian whose strength and ferocity are those of a wild beast. Scour the palace-grounds and the city. Throw a cordon about the walls. If you find he has escaped from the city, as he may well do, take a troop of horsemen and follow him. Once past the walls it will be like hunting a wolf through the hills. But haste, and you may yet catch him.'___'This is a matter which requires more than ordinary human wits,' said Orastes. 'Perhaps we should seek Xaltotun's advice.'___'No!' exclaimed Tarascus violently. 'Let the troopers pursue Conan and slay him. Xaltotun can hold no grudge against us if I we kill a prisoner to prevent his escape.'___'Well,' said Orastes, 'I am no Acheronian, but I am versed in some of the arts, and the control of certain spirits which have cloaked themselves in material substance. Perhaps I can aid you in this matter.'___The fountain of Thrallos stood in a clustered ring of oaks beside the road a mile from the walls of

the city. Its musical tinkle reached Conan's ears through the silence of the starlight. He drank deep of its icy stream, and then hurried southward toward a small, dense thicket he saw there. Rounding it, he saw a great white horse tied among the bushes. Heaving a deep gusty sigh he reached it with one stride ? a mocking laugh brought him about, glaring. ___A dully glinting, mail-clad figure moved out of the shadows into the starlight. This was no plumed and burnished palace guardsman. It was a tall man in morion and gray chain-mail - one of the Adventurers, a class of warriors peculiar to Nemedias; men who had not attained to the wealth and position of knighthood, or had fallen from that estate; hard-bitten fighters, dedicating their lives to war and adventure. They constituted a class of their own, sometimes commanding troops, but themselves accountable to no man but the king. Conan knew that he could have been discovered by no more dangerous a foe. ___A quick glance among the shadows convinced him that the man was alone, and he expanded his great chest slightly, digging his toes into the turf, as his thews coiled tensely. ___'I was riding for Belverus on Amalric's business,' said the Adventurer, advancing warily. The starlight was a long sheen on the great two-handed sword he bore naked in his hand. 'A horse whinnied to mine from the thicket. I investigated and thought it strange a steed should be tethered here. I waited - and lo, I have caught a rare prize!' ___The Adventurers lived by their swords. 'I know you,' muttered the Nemedian. 'You are Conan, king of Aquilonia. I thought I saw you die in the valley of the Valkia, but?' ___Conan sprang as a dying tiger springs. Practised fighter though the Adventurer was, he did not realize the desperate quickness that lurks in barbaric sinews. He was caught off guard, his heavy sword half lifted. Before he could either strike or parry, the king's poniard sheathed itself in his throat, above the gorget, slanting downward into his heart. With a choked gurgle he reeled and went down, and Conan ruthlessly tore his blade free as his victim fell. The white horse snorted violently and shied at the sight and scent of blood on the sword. ___Glaring down at his lifeless enemy, dripping poniard in hand, sweat glistening on his broad breast, Conan poised like a statue, listening intently. In the woods about there was no sound, save for the sleepy cheep of awakened birds. But in the city, a mile away, he heard the strident blare of a trumpet. ___Hastily he bent over the fallen man. A few seconds' search convinced him that whatever message the man might have borne was intended to be conveyed by word of mouth. But he did not pause in his task. It was not many hours until dawn. A few minutes later the white horse was galloping westward along the white road, and the rider wore the gray mail of a Nemedian Adventurer. _____7

The Rending of the Veil _____ Conan knew his only chance of escape lay in speed. He did not even consider hiding somewhere near Belverus until the chase passed on; he was certain that the uncanny ally of Tarascus would be able to ferret him out. Besides, he was not one to skulk and hide; an open fight or an open chase, either suited his temperament better. He had a long start, he knew. He would lead them a grinding race for the border. ___Zenobia had chosen well in selecting the white horse. His speed, toughness and endurance were obvious. The girl knew weapons and horses, and, Conan reflected with some satisfaction, she knew men. He rode westward at a gait that ate up the miles. ___It was a sleeping land through which he rode, past grove-sheltered villages and white-walled villas amid spacious fields and orchards that grew sparser as he fared westward. As the villages thinned, the land grew more rugged, and the keeps that frowned from eminences told of centuries of border war. But none rode down from those castles to challenge or halt

him. The lords of the keeps were following the banner of Amalric; the pennons that were wont to wave over these towers were now floating over the Aquilonian plains.____When the last huddled village fell behind him, Conan left the road, which was beginning to bend toward the northwest, toward the distant passes. To keep to the road would mean to pass by border towers, still garrisoned with armed men who would not allow him to pass unquestioned. He knew there would be no patrols riding the border marches on either side, as in ordinary times, but there were those towers, and with dawn there would probably be cavalcades of returning soldiers with wounded men in ox-carts.____This road from Belverus was the only road that crossed the border for fifty miles from north to south. It followed a series of passes through the hills, and on either hand lay a wide expanse of wild, sparsely inhabited mountains. He maintained his due westerly direction, intending to cross the border deep in the wilds of the hills that lay to the south of the passes. It was a shorter route, more arduous, but safer for a hunted fugitive. One man on a horse could traverse country an army would find impassable.____But at dawn he had not reached the hills; they were a long, low, blue rampart stretching along the horizon ahead of him. Here there were neither farms nor villages, no white-walled villas looming among clustering trees. The dawn wind stirred the tall stiff grass, and there was nothing but the long rolling swells of brown earth, covered with dry grass, and in the distance the gaunt walls of a stronghold on a low hill. Too many Aquilonian raiders had crossed the mountains in not too distant days for the countryside to be thickly settled as it was farther to the east.____Dawn ran like a prairie fire across the grasslands, and high overhead sounded a weird crying as a straggling wedge of wild geese winged swiftly southward. In a grassy swale Conan halted and unsaddled his mount. Its sides were heaving, its coat plastered with sweat. He had pushed it unmercifully through the hours before dawn.____While it munched the brittle grass and rolled, he lay at the crest of the low slope, staring eastward. Far away to the northward he could see the road he had left, streaming like a white ribbon over a distant rise. No black dots moved along that glistening ribbon. There was no sign about the castle in the distance to indicate that the keepers had noticed the lone wayfarer.____An hour later the land still stretched bare. The only sign of life was a glint of steel on the far-off battlements, a raven in the sky that wheeled backward and forth, dipping and rising as if seeking something. Conan saddled and rode westward at a more leisurely gait.____As he topped the farther crest of the slope, a raucous screaming burst out over his head, and looking up, he saw the raven napping high above him, cawing incessantly. As he rode on, it followed him, maintaining its position and making the morning hideous with its strident cries, heedless of his efforts to drive it away.____This kept up for hours, until Conan's teeth were on edge, and he felt that he would give half his kingdom to be allowed to wring that black neck.____'Devils of hell!' he roared in futile rage, shaking his mailed fist at the frantic bird. 'Why do you harry me with your squawking? Begone, you black spawn of perdition, and peck for wheat in the farmer's fields!'____He was ascending the first pitch of the hills, and he seemed to hear an echo of the bird's clamor far behind him. Turning in his saddle, he presently made out another black dot hanging in the blue. Beyond that again he caught the glint of the afternoon sun on steel. That could mean only one thing: armed men. And they were not riding along the beaten road, which was out of his sight beyond the horizon. They were following him.____His face grew grim and he shivered slightly as he stared at the raven that wheeled high above him.____'So

it is more than the whim of a brainless beast?' he muttered. 'Those riders cannot see you, spawn of hell; but the other bird can see you, and they can see him. You follow me, he follows you, and they follow him. Are you only a craftily trained feathered creature, or some devil in the form of a bird? Did Xaltotun set you on my trail? Are you Xaltotun?'___Only a strident screech answered him, a screech vibrating with harsh mockery.___Conan wasted no more breath on his dusky betrayer. Grimly he settled to the long grind of the hills. He dared not push the horse too hard; the rest he had allowed it had not been enough to freshen it. He was still far ahead of his pursuers, but they would cut down that lead steadily. It was almost a certainty that their horses were fresher than his, for they had undoubtedly changed mounts at that castle he had passed.___The going grew rougher, the scenery more rugged, steep grassy slopes pitching up to densely timbered mountainsides. Here, he knew, he might elude his hunters, but for that hellish bird that squalled incessantly above him. He could no longer see them in this broken country, but he was certain that they still followed him, guided unerringly by their feathered allies. That black shape became like a demoniac incubus, hounding him through measureless hells. The stones he hurled with a curse went wide or fell harmless, though in his youth he had felled hawks on the wing.___The horse was tiring fast. Conan recognized the grim finality of his position. He sensed an inexorable driving fate behind all this. He could not escape. He was as much a captive as he had been in the pits of Belverus. But he was no son of the Orient to yield passively to what seemed inevitable. If he could not escape, he would at least take some of his foes into eternity with him. He turned into a wide thicket of larches that masked a slope, looking for a place to turn at bay.___Then ahead of him there rang a strange, shrill scream, human yet weirdly timbred. An instant later he had pushed through a screen of branches, and saw the source of that eldritch cry. In a small glade below him four soldiers in Nemedian chain-mail were binding a noose about the neck of a gaunt old woman in peasant garb. A heap of fagots, bound with cord on the ground near by, showed what her occupation had been when surprised by these stragglers.___Conan felt slow fury swell his heart as he looked silently down and saw the ruffians dragging her toward a tree whose low-spreading branches were obviously intended to act as a gibbet. He had crossed the frontier an hour ago. He was standing on his own soil, watching the murder of one of his own subjects. The old woman was struggling with surprising strength and energy, and as he watched, she lifted her head and voiced again the strange, weird, far-carrying call he had heard before. It was echoed as if in mockery by the raven flapping above the trees. The soldiers laughed roughly, and one struck her in the mouth.___Conan swung from his weary steed and dropped down the face of the rocks, landing with a clang of mail on the grass. The four men wheeled at the sound and drew their swords, gaping at the mailed giant who faced them, sword in hand.___Conan laughed harshly. His eyes were bleak as flint.___'Dogs!' he said without passion and without mercy. 'Do Nemedian jackals set themselves up as executioners and hang my subjects at will? First you must take the head of their king. Here I stand, awaiting your lordly pleasure!___The soldiers srared at him uncertainly as he strode toward them.___'Who is this madman?' growled a bearded ruffian. 'He wears Nemedian mail, but speaks with an Aquilonian accent.'___'No matter,' quoth another. 'Cut him down, and then we'll hang the old hag.'___And so saying he ran at Conan, lifting his sword. But before he could strike, the king's great blade lashed down, splitting helmet and skull. The man fell before him,

but the others were hardy rogues. They gave tongue like wolves and surged about the lone figure in the gray mail, and the clamor and din of steel drowned the cries of the circling raven. ___ Conan did not shout. His eyes coals of blue fire and his lips smiling bleakly, he lashed right and left with his two-handed sword. For all his size he was quick as a cat on his feet, and he was constantly in motion, presenting a moving target so that thrusts and swings cut empty air oftener than not. Yet when he struck he was perfectly balanced, and his blows fell with devastating power. Three of the four were down, dying in their own blood, and the fourth was bleeding from half a dozen wounds, stumbling in headlong retreat as he parried frantically, when Conan's spur caught in the surcoat of one of the fallen men. ___ The king stumbled, and before he could catch himself the Nemedian, with the frenzy of desperation, rushed him so savagely that Conan staggered and fell sprawling over the corpse. The Nemedian croaked in triumph and sprang forward, lifting his great sword with both hands over his right shoulder, as he braced his legs wide for the stroke - and then, over the prostrate king, something huge and hairy shot like a thunderbolt full on the soldier's breast, and his yelp of triumph changed to a shriek of death. ___ Conan, scrambling up, saw the man lying dead with his throat torn out, and a great gray wolf stood over him, head sunk as it smelled the blood that formed a pool on the grass. ___ The king turned as the old woman spoke to him. She stood straight and tall before him, and in spite of her ragged garb, her features, clear-cut and aquiline, and her keen black eyes, were not those of a common peasant woman. She called to the wolf and it trotted to her side like a great dog and rubbed its giant shoulder against her knee, while it gazed at Conan with great green lambent eyes. Absently she laid her hand upon its mighty neck, and so the two stood regarding the king of Aquilonia. He found their steady gaze disquieting, though there was no hostility in it. ___ 'Men say King Conan died beneath the stones and dirt when the cliffs crumbled by Valkia,' she said in a deep, strong, resonant voice. ___ 'So they say,' he growled. He was in no mood for controversy, and he thought of those armored riders who were pushing nearer every moment. The raven above him cawed stridently, and he cast an involuntary glare upward, grinding his teeth in a spasm of nervous irritation. ___ Up on the ledge the white horse stood with drooping head. The old woman looked at it, and then at the raven; and then she lifted a strange weird cry as she had before. As if recognizing the call, the raven wheeled, suddenly mute, and raced eastward. But before it had got out of sight, the shadow of mighty wings fell across it. An eagle soared up from the tangle of trees, and rising above it, swooped and struck the black messenger to the earth. The strident voice of betrayal was stilled for ever. ___ 'Crom!' muttered Conan, staring at the old woman. 'Are you a magician, too?' ___ 'I am Zelata,' she said. 'The people of the valleys call me a witch. Was that child of the night guiding armed men on your trail?' ___ 'Aye.' She did not seem to think the answer fantastic. 'They cannot be far behind me.' ___ 'Lead your horse and follow me, King Conan,' she said briefly. ___ Without comment he mounted the rocks and brought his horse down to the glade by a circuitous path. As he came he saw the eagle reappear, dropping lazily down from the sky, and rest an instant on Zelata's shoulder, spreading its great wings lightly so as not to crush her with its weight. ___ Without a word she led the way, the great wolf trotting at her side, the eagle soaring above her. Through deep thickets and along tortuous ledges poised over deep ravines she led him, and finally along a narrow precipice-edged path to a curious dwelling of stone, half hut,

half cavern, beneath a cliff hidden among the gorges and crags. The eagle flew to the pinnacle of this cliff, and perched there like a motionless sentinel. Still silent, Zelata stabled the horse in a near-by cave, with leaves and grass piled high for provender, and a tiny spring bubbling in the dim recesses. In the hut she seated the king on a rude, hide-covered bench, and she herself sat upon a low stool before the tiny fireplace, while she made a fire of tamarisk chunks and prepared a frugal meal. The great wolf drowsed beside her, facing the fire, his huge head sunk on his paws, his ears twitching in his dreams. 'You do not fear to sit in the hut of a witch?' she asked, breaking her silence at last. An impatient shrug of his gray-mailed shoulders was her guest's only reply. She gave into his hands a wooden dish heaped with dried fruits, cheese and barley bread, and a great pot of the heady upland beer, brewed from barley grown in the high valleys. 'I have found the brooding silence of the glens more pleasing than the babble of city streets,' she said. 'The children of the wild are kinder than the children of men.' Her hand briefly stroked the ruff of the sleeping wolf. 'My children were afar from me today, or I had not needed your sword, my king. They were coming at my call.' 'What grudge had those Nemedian dogs against you?' Conan demanded. 'Skulkers from the invading army straggle all over the countryside, from the frontier to Tarantia,' she answered. 'The foolish villagers in the valleys told them that I had a store of gold hidden away, so as to divert their attentions from their villages. They demanded treasure from me, and my answers angered them. But neither skulkers nor the men who pursue you, nor any raven will find you here.' He shook his head, eating ravenously. 'I'm for Tarantia.' She shook her head. 'You thrust your head into the dragon's jaws. Best seek refuge abroad. The heart is gone from your kingdom.' 'What do you mean?' he demanded. 'Battles have been lost before, yet wars won. A kingdom is not lost by a single defeat.' 'And you will go to Tarantia?' 'Aye. Prospero will be holding it against Amalric.' 'Are you sure?' 'Hell's devils, woman!' he exclaimed wrathfully. 'What else?' She shook her head. 'I feel that it is otherwise. Let us see. Not lightly is the veil rent; yet I will rend it a little, and show you your capital city.' Conan did not see what she cast upon the fire, but the wolf whimpered in his dreams, and a green smoke gathered and billowed up into the hut. And as he watched, the walls and ceiling of the hut seemed to widen, to grow remote and vanish, merging with infinite immensities; the smoke rolled about him, blotting out everything. And in its forms moved and faded, and stood out in startling clarity. He stared at the familiar towers and streets of Tarantia, where a mob seethed and screamed, and at the same time he was somehow able to see the banners of Nemedias moving inexorably westward through the smoke and flame of a pillaged land. In the great square of Tarantia the frantic throng milled and yammered, screaming that the king was dead, that the barons were girding themselves to divide the land between them, and that the rule of a king, even of Valerius, was better than anarchy. Prospero, shining in his armor, rode among them, trying to pacify them, bidding them trust Count Trocero, urging them to man the wall and aid his knights in defending the city. They turned on him, shrieking with fear and unreasoning rage, howling that he was Trocero's butcher, a more evil foe than Amalric himself. Offal and stones were hurled at his knights. A slight blurring of the picture, that might have denoted a passing of time, and then Conan saw Prospero and his knights filing out of the gates and spurring southward. Behind him the city was in an uproar. 'Fools!' muttered Conan thickly.

'Fools! Why could they not trust Prospero? Zelata, if you are making game of me, with some trickery?'___'This has passed,' answered Zelata imperturbably, though somberly. 'It was the evening of the day that has passed when Prospero rode out of Tarantia, with the hosts of Amalric almost within sight. From the walls men saw the flame of their pillaging. So I read it in the smoke. At sunset the Nemedians rode into Tarantia, unopposed. Look! Even now, in the royal hall of Tarantia?___Abruptly Conan was looking into the great coronation hall. Valerius stood on the regal dais, clad in ermine robes, and Amalric, still in his dusty, bloodstained armor, placed a rich and gleaming circlet on his yellow locks - the crown of Aquilonia! The people cheered; long lines of steel-clad Nemedian warriors looked grimly on, and nobles long in disfavor at Conan's court strutted and swaggered with the emblem of Valerius on their sleeves.___'Crom!' It was an explosive imprecation from Conan's lips as he started up, his great fists clenched into hammers, his veins on his temples knotting, his features convulsed. 'A Nemedian placing the crown of Aquilonia on that renegade - in the royal hall of Tarantia!___As if dispelled by his violence, the smoke faded, and he saw Zelata's black eyes gleaming at him through the mist.___'You have seen - the people of your capital have forfeited the freedom you won for them by sweat and blood; they have sold themselves to the slavers and the butchers. They have shown that they do not trust their destiny. Can you rely upon them for the winning back of your kingdom?'___'They thought I was dead,' he grunted, recovering some of his poise. 'I have no son. Men can't be governed by a memory. What if the Nemedians have taken Tarantia? There still remain the provinces, the barons, and the people of the countrysides. Valerius has won an empty glory.'___'You are stubborn, as befits a fighter. I cannot show you the future, I cannot show you all the past. Nay, I show you nothing. I merely make you see windows opened in the veil by powers unguessed. Would you look into the past for a clue of the present?'___'Aye.' He seated himself abruptly.___Again the green smoke rose and billowed. Again images unfolded before him, this time alien and seemingly irrelevant.___He saw great towering black walls, pedestals half hidden in the shadows upholding images of hideous, half-bestial gods. Men moved in the shadows, dark, wiry men, clad in red, silken loincloths. They were bearing a green jade sarcophagus along a gigantic black corridor. But before he could tell much about what he saw, the scene shifted. He saw a cavern, dim, shadowy and haunted with a strange intangible horror. On an altar of black stone stood a curious golden vessel, shaped like the shell of a scallop. Into this cavern came some of the same dark, wiry men who had borne the mummy-case. They seized the golden vessel, and then the shadows swirled around them and what happened he could not say. But he saw a glimmer in a whorl of darkness, like a ball of living fire. Then the smoke was only smoke, drifting up from the fire of tamarisk chunks, thinning and fading.___'But what does this portend?' he demanded, bewildered. 'What I saw in Tarantia I can understand. But what means this glimpse of Zamorian thieves sneaking through a subterranean temple of Set, in Stygia? And that cavern - I've never seen or heard of anything like it, in all my wanderings. If you can show me that much, these shreds of vision which mean nothing, disjointed, why can you not show me all that is to occur?' Zelata stirred the fire without replying. 'These things are governed by immutable laws,' she said at last. 'I can not make you understand; I do not altogether understand myself, though I have sought wisdom in the silences of the high places for more years than I can remember. I cannot save you, though I would if I might. Man must, at

last, work out his own salvation. Yet perhaps wisdom may come to me in dreams, and in the morn I may be able to give you the clue to the enigma.'___'What enigma?' he demanded.___'The mystery that confronts you, whereby you have lost a kingdom,' she answered. And then she spread a sheepskin upon the floor before the hearth. 'Sleep,' she said briefly.___Without a word he stretched himself upon it, and sank into restless but deep sleep through which phantoms moved silently and monstrous shapeless shadows crept. Once, limned against a purple sunless horizon, he saw the mighty walls and towers of a great city such as rose nowhere on the waking earth he knew. Its colossal pylons and purple minarets lifted toward the stars, and over it, floating like a giant mirage, hovered the bearded countenance of the man Xaltotun.___Conan woke in the chill whiteness of early dawn, to see Zelata crouched beside the tiny fire. He had not awakened once in the night, and the sound of the great wolf leaving or entering should have roused him. Yet the wolf was there, beside the hearth, with its shaggy coat wet with dew, and with more than dew. Blood glistened wetly amid the thick fell, and there was a cut upon his shoulder.___Zelata nodded, without looking around, as if reading the thoughts of her royal guest.___'He has hunted before dawn, and red was the hunting. I think the man who hunted a king will hunt no more, neither man nor beast.'___Conan stared at the great beast with strange fascination as he moved to take the food Zelata offered him.___'When I come to my throne again I won't forget,' he said briefly. 'You've befriended me - by Crom, I can't remember when I've lain down and slept at the mercy of man or woman as I did last night. But what of the riddle you would read me this morn?''___A long silence ensued, in which the crackle of the tamarisks was loud on the hearth.___'Find the heart of your kingdom,' she said at last. 'There lies your defeat and your power. You fight more than mortal man. You will not press the throne again unless you find the heart of your kingdom.'___'Do you mean the city of Tarantia?''___She shook her head. 'I am but an oracle, through whose lips the gods speak. My lips are sealed by them lest I speak too much. You must find the heart of your kingdom. I can say no more. My lips are opened and sealed by the gods.'___Dawn was still white on the peaks when Conan rode westward. A glance back showed him Zelata standing in the door of her hut, inscrutable as ever, the great wolf beside her.___A gray sky arched overhead, and a moaning wind was chill with a promise of winter. Brown leaves fluttered slowly down from the bare branches, sifting upon his mailed shoulders.___All day he pushed through the hills, avoiding roads and villages. Toward nightfall he began to drop down from the heights, tier by tier, and saw the broad plains of Aquilonia spread out beneath him.___Villages and farms lay close to the foot of the hills on the western side of the mountains, for, for half a century, most of the raiding across the frontier had been done by the Aquilonians. But now only embers and ashes showed where farm huts and villas had stood.___In the gathering darkness Conan rode slowly on. There was little fear of discovery, which he dreaded from friend as well as from foe. The Nemedians had remembered old scores on their westward drive, and Valerius had made no attempt to restrain his allies. He did not count on winning the love of the common people. A vast swath of desolation had been cut through the country from the foothills westward. Conan cursed as he rode over blackened expanses that had been rich fields, and saw the gaunt gable-ends of burned houses jutting against the sky. He moved through an empty and deserted land, like a ghost out of a forgotten and outworn past.___The speed with which the army had traversed the land showed what little

resistance it had encountered. Yet had Conan been leading his Aquilonians the invading army would have been forced to buy every foot they gained with their blood. The bitter realization permeated his soul; he was not the representative of a dynasty. He was only a lone adventurer. Even the drop of dynastic blood Valerius boasted had more hold on the minds of men than the memory of Conan and the freedom and power he had given the kingdom.____No pursuers followed him down out of the hills. He watched for wandering or returning Nemedian troops, but met none. Skulkers gave him a wide path, supposing him to be one of the conquerors, what of his harness. Groves and rivers were far more plentiful on the western side of the mountains, and coverts for concealment were not lacking.____So he moved across the pillaged land, halting only to rest his horse, eating frugally of the food Zelata had given him, until, on a dawn when he lay hidden on a river bank where willows and oaks grew thickly, he glimpsed, afar, across the rolling plains dotted with rich groves, the blue and golden towers of Tarantia.____He was no longer in a deserted land, but one teeming with varied life. His progress thenceforth was slow and cautious, through thick woods and unfrequented byways. It was dusk when he reached the plantation of Servius Galannus._____8 Dying Embers____The countryside about Tarantia had escaped the fearful ravaging of the more easterly provinces. There were evidences of the march of a conquering army in broken hedges, plundered fields and looted granaries, but torch and steel had not been loosed wholesale.____There was but one grim splotch on the landscape - a charred expanse of ashes and blackened stone, where, Conan knew, had once stood the stately villa of one of his staunchest supporters.____The king dared not openly approach the Galannus farm, which lay only a few miles from the city. In the twilight he rode through an extensive woodland, until he sighted a keeper's lodge through the trees. Dismounting and tying his horse, he approached the thick, arched door with the intention of sending the keeper after Servius. He did not know what enemies the manor house might be sheltering. He had seen no troops, but they might be quartered all over the countryside. But as he drew near, he saw the door open and a compact figure in silk hose and richly embroidered doublet stride forth and turn up a path that wound away through the woods.____At the low call the master of the plantation wheeled with a startled exclamation. His hand flew to the short hunting-sword at his hip, and he recoiled from the tall gray steel figure standing in the dusk before him.____'Who are you?' he demanded. 'What is your ? Mitra!'____His breath hissed inward and his ruddy face paled. 'Avaunt!' he ejaculated. 'Why have you come back from the gray lands of death to terrify me? I was always your true liegeman in your lifetime?'____'As I still expect you to be,' answered Conan. 'Stop trembling, man; I'm flesh and blood.'____Sweating with uncertainty Servius approached and stared into the face of the mail-clad giant, and then, convinced of the reality of what he saw, he dropped to one knee and doffed his plumed cap.____'Your Majesty! Truly, this is a miracle passing belief! The great bell in the citadel has tolled your dirge, days ago. Men said you died at Valkia, crushed under a million tons of earth and broken granite.'____'It was another in my harness,' grunted Conan. 'But let us talk later. If there is such a thing as a joint of beef on your board?'____'Forgive me, my lord!' cried Servius, springing to his feet. 'The dust of travel is gray on your mail, and I keep you standing here without rest or sup! Mitra! I see well enough now that you are alive, but I swear, when I turned and saw you standing all gray and dim in the twilight, the marrow of my knees turned to water. It is an ill thing to meet a man

you thought dead in the woodland at dusk.'___'Bid the keeper see to my steed which is tied behind yonder oak,' requested Conan, and Servius nodded, drawing the king up the path. The patrician, recovering from his supernatural fright, had become extremely nervous.'___'I will send a servant from the manor,' he said. 'The keeper is in his lodge - but I dare not trust even my servants in these days. It is better that only I know of your presence.'___Approaching the great house that glimmered dimly through the trees, he turned aside into a little-used path that ran between close-set oaks whose intertwining branches formed a vault overhead, shutting out the dim light of the gathering dusk.'___Servius hurried on through the darkness without speaking, and with something resembling panic in his manner, and presently led Conan through a small side-door into a narrow, dimly illuminated corridor. They traversed this in haste and silence, and Servius brought the king into a spacious chamber with a high, oak-beamed ceiling and richly paneled walls. Logs flamed in the wide fireplace, for there was a frosty edge to the air, and a great meat pasty in a stone platter stood smoking on a broad mahogany board. Servius locked the massive door and extinguished the candles that stood in a silver candlestick on the table, leaving the chamber illuminated only by the fire on the hearth.'___'Your pardon, your Majesty,' he apologized. 'These are perilous times; spies lurk everywhere. It were better that none be able to peer through the windows and recognize you. This pasty, however, is just from the oven, as I intended supping on my return from talk with my keeper. If your Majesty would deign?'___'The light is sufficient,' grunted Conan, seating himself with scant ceremony, and drawing his poniard.'___He dug ravenously into the luscious dish, and washed it down with great gulps of wine from grapes grown in Servius' vineyards. He seemed oblivious to any sense of peril, but Servius shifted uneasily on his settle by the fire, nervously fingering the heavy gold chain about his neck. He glanced continually at the diamond-panes of the casement, gleaming dimly in the firelight, and cocked his ear toward the door, as if half expecting to hear the pad of furtive feet in the corridor without.'___Finishing his meal, Conan rose and seated himself on another settle before the fire.'___'I won't jeopardize you long by my presence, Servius,' he said abruptly. 'Dawn will find me far from your plantation.'___'My lord?' Servius lifted his hands in expostulation, but Conan waved his protests aside.'___[know your loyalty and your courage. Both are above reproach. But if Valerius has usurped my throne, it would be death for you to shelter me, if you were discovered.'___'I am not strong enough to defy him openly,' admitted Servius. 'The fifty men-at-arms I could lead to battle would be but a handful of straws. You saw the ruins of Emilius Scavomis' plantation?'___Conan nodded, frowning darkly.'___'He was the strongest patrician in this province, as you know. He refused to give his allegiance to Valerius. The Nemedians burned him in the ruins of his own villa. After that the rest of us saw the futility of resistance, especially as the people of Tarantia refused to fight. We submitted and Valerius spared our lives, though he levied a tax upon us that will ruin many. But what could we do? We thought you were dead. Many of the barons had been slain, others taken prisoner. The army was shattered and scattered. You have no heir to take the crown. There was no one to lead us?'___'Was there not Count Trocero of Poitain?' demanded Conan harshly.'___Servius spread his hands helplessly.'___'It is true that his general Prospero was in the field with a small army. Retreating before Amalric, he urged men to rally to his banner. But with your Majesty dead, men remembered old wars and civil brawls, and how Trocero and his

Poitanians once rode through these provinces even as Amalric was riding now, with torch and sword. The barons were jealous of Trocero. Some men - spies of Valerius perhaps - shouted that the Count of Poitain intended seizing the crown for himself. Old sectional hates flared up again. If we had had one man with dynastic blood in his veins we would have crowned and followed him against Nemedias. But we had none.____'The barons who followed you loyally would not follow one of their own number, each holding himself as good as his neighbor, each fearing the ambitions of the others. You were the cord that held the fagots together. When the cord was cut, the fagots fell apart. If you had had a son, the barons would have rallied loyally to him. But there was no point for their patriotism to focus upon.____'The merchants and commoners, dreading anarchy and a return of feudal days when each baron was his own law, cried out that any king was better than none, even Valerius, who was at least of the blood of the old dynasty. There was no one to oppose him when he rode up at the head of his steel-clad hosts, with the scarlet dragon of Nemedias floating over him, and rang his lance against the gates of Tarantia.____'Nay, the people threw open the gates and knelt in the dust before him. They had refused to aid Prospero in holding the city. They said they had rather be ruled by Valerius than by Trocero. They said - truthfully - that the barons would not rally to Trocero, but that many would accept Valerius. They said that by yielding to Valerius they would escape the devastation of civil war, and the fury of the Nemedians. Prospero rode southward with his ten thousand knights, and the horsemen of the Nemedians entered the city a few hours later. They did not follow him. They remained to see that Valerius was crowned in Tarantia.'____'Then the old witch's smoke showed the truth,' muttered Conan, feeling a queer chill along his spine. 'Amalric crowned Valerius?'____'Aye, in the coronation hall, with the blood of slaughter scarcely dried on his hands.'____'And do the people thrive under his benevolent rule?' asked Conan with angry irony.____'He lives like a foreign prince in the midst of a conquered land,' answered Servius bitterly. 'His court is filled with Nemedians, the palace troops are of the same breed, and a large garrison of them occupy the citadel. Aye, the hour of the Dragon has come at last.____'Nemedians swagger like lords through the streets. Women are outraged and merchants plundered daily, and Valerius either can, or will, make no attempt to curb them. Nay, he is but their puppet, their figurehead. Men of sense knew he would be, and the people are beginning to find it out.____'Amalric has ridden forth with a strong army to reduce the outlying provinces where some of the barons have defied him. But there is no unity among them. Their jealousy of each other is stronger than their fear of Amalric. He will crush them one by one. Many castles and cities, realizing that, have sent in their submission. Those who resist fare miserably. The Nemedians are glutting their long hatred. And their ranks are swelled by Aquilonians whom fear, gold, or necessity of occupation are forcing into their armies. It is a natural consequence.'____Conan nodded somberly, staring at the red reflections of the firelight on the richly carved oaken panels.____'Aquilonia has a king instead of the anarchy they feared,' said Servius at last. 'Valerius does not protect his subjects against his allies. Hundreds who could not pay the ransom imposed upon them have been sold to the Kothic slave-traders.'____Conan's head jerked up and a lethal flame lit his blue eyes. He swore gustily, his mighty hands knotting into iron hammers.____'Aye, white men sell white men and white women, as it was in the feudal days. In the palaces of Shem and of Turan they will live out the lives of slaves. Valerius is king, but the unity for which the

people looked, even though of the sword, is not complete.____'Gunderland in the north and Poitain in the south are yet unconquered, and there are unsubdued provinces in the west, where the border barons have the backing of the Bossonian bowmen. Yet these outlying provinces are no real menace to Valerius. They must remain on the defensive, and will be lucky if they are able to keep their independence. Here Valerius and his foreign knights are supreme.'____'Let him make the best of it then,' said Conan grimly. 'His time is short. The people will rise when they learn that I'm alive. We'll take Tarantia back before Amalric can return with his army. Then we'll sweep these dogs from the kingdom.'____Servius was silent. The crackle of the fire was loud in the stillness.____'Well,' exclaimed Conan impatiently, 'why do you sit with your head bent, staring at the hearth? Do you doubt what I have said?'____Servius avoided the king's eye.____'What mortal man can do, you will do, your Majesty,' he answered. 'I have ridden behind you in battle, and I know that no mortal being can stand before your sword.'____'What, then?'____Servius drew his fur-trimmed jupon closer about him, and shivered in spite of the flame.____'Men say your fall was occasioned by sorcery,' he said presently.____'What then?'____'What mortal can fight against sorcery? Who is this veiled man who communes at midnight with Valerius and his allies, as men say, who appears and disappears so mysteriously? Men say in whispers that he is a great magician who died thousands of years ago, but has returned from death's gray lands to overthrow the king of Aquilonia and restore the dynasty of which Valerius is heir.'____'What matter?' exclaimed Conan angrily. 'I escaped from the devil-haunted pits of Belverus, and from diabolism in the mountains. If the people rise?'____Servius shook his head.____'Your staunchest supporters in the eastern and central provinces are dead, fled or imprisoned. Gunderland is far to the north, Poitain far to the south. The Bossonians have retired to their marches far to the west. It would take weeks to gather and concentrate these forces, and before that could be done, each levy would be attacked separately by Amalric and destroyed.'____'But an uprising in the central provinces would tip the scales for us!' exclaimed Conan. 'We could seize Tarantia and hold it against Amalric until the Gundermen and Poitanians could get here.'____Servius hesitated, and his voice sank to a whisper.____'Men say you died accursed. Men say this veiled stranger cast a spell upon you to slay you and break your army. The great bell has tolled your dirge. Men believe you to be dead. And the central provinces would not rise, even if they knew you lived. They would not dare. Sorcery defeated you at Valkia. Sorcery brought the news to Tarantia, for that very night men were shouting of it in the streets.____'A Nemedian priest loosed black magic again in the streets of Tarantia to slay men who still were loyal to your memory. I myself saw it. Armed men dropped like flies and died in the streets in a manner no man could understand. And the lean priest laughed and said: 'I am only Altaro, only an acolyte of Orastes, who is but an acolyte of him who wears the veil; not mine is the power; the power but works through me.'____'Well,' said Conan harshly, 'is it not better to die honorably than to live in infamy? Is death worse than oppression, slavery and ultimate destruction?'____'When the fear of sorcery is in, reason is out,' replied Servius. 'The fear of the central provinces is too great to allow them to rise for you. The outlying provinces would fight for you - but the same sorcery that smote your army at Valkia would smite you again. The Nemedians hold the broadest, richest and most thickly populated sections of Aquilonia, and they cannot be defeated by the forces which might still be at your command. You would

be sacrificing your loyal subjects uselessly. In sorrow I say it, but it is true: King Conan, you are a king without a kingdom.'___Conan stared into the fire without replying. A smoldering log crashed down among the flames without a bursting shower of sparks. It might have been the crashing ruin of his kingdom. ___Again Conan felt the presence of a grim reality behind the veil of material illusion. He sensed again the inexorable drive of a ruthless fate. A feeling of furious panic tugged at his soul, a sense of being trapped, and a red rage that burned to destroy and kill. ___'Where are the officials of my court?' he demanded at last. 'Pallantides was sorely wounded at Valkia, was ransomed by his family, and now lies in his castle in Attalus. He will be fortunate if he ever rides again. Publius, the chancellor, has fled the kingdom in disguise, no man knows whither. The council has been disbanded. Some were imprisoned, some banished. Many of your loyal subjects have been put to death. Tonight, for instance, the Countess Albiona dies under the headsman's ax.'___Conan started and stared at Servius with such anger smoldering in his blue eyes that the patrician shrank back. 'Why?'___'Because she would not become the mistress of Valerius. Her hands are forfeit, her henchmen sold into slavery, and at midnight, in the Iron Tower, her head must fall. Be advised, my king - to me you will ever be my king - and flee before you are discovered. In these days none is safe. Spies and informers creep among us, betraying the slightest deed or word of discontent as treason and rebellion. If you make yourself known to your subjects it will only end in your capture and death. ___'My horses and all the men that I can trust are at your disposal. Before dawn we can be far from Tarantia, and well on our way toward the border. If I cannot aid you to recover your kingdom, I can at least follow you into exile.'___Conan shook his head. Servius glanced uneasily at him as he sat staring into the fire, his chin propped on his mighty fist. The firelight gleamed redly on his steel mail, on his baleful eyes. They burned in the firelight like the eyes of a wolf. Servius was again aware, as in the past, and now more strongly than ever, of something alien about the king. That great frame under the mail mesh was too hard and supple for a civilized man; the elemental fire of the primitive burned in those smoldering eyes. Now the barbaric suggestion about the king was more pronounced, as if in his extremity the outward aspects of civilization were stripped away, to reveal the primordial core. Conan was reverting to his pristine type. He did not act as a civilized man would act under the same conditions, nor did his thoughts run in the same channels. He was unpredictable. It was only a stride from the king of Aquilonia to the skin-clad slayer of the Cimmerian hills. ___'I'll ride to Poitain, if it may be,' Conan said at last. 'But I'll ride alone. And I have one last duty to perform as king of Aquilonia.'___'What do you mean, your Majesty?' asked Servius, shaken by a premonition. ___'I'm going into Tarantia after Albiona tonight,' answered the king. 'I've failed all my other loyal subjects, it seems - if they take her head, they can have mine too.'___'This is madness!' cried Servius, staggering up and clutching his throat, as if he already felt the noose closing about it. ___'There are secrets to the Tower which few know,' said Conan. 'Anyway, I'd be a dog to leave Albiona to die because of her loyalty to me. I may be a king without a kingdom, but I'm not a man without honor.' . ___'It will ruin us all!' whispered Servius. ___'It will ruin no one but me if I fail. You've risked enough. I ride alone tonight. This is all I want you to do: procure me a patch for my eye, a staff for my hand, and garments such as travelers wear.'_____9 'It Is the King or His Ghost!'_____Many men passed through the great

arched gates of Tarantia between sunset and midnight - belated travelers, merchants from afar with heavily laden mules, free workmen from the surrounding farms and vineyards. Now that Valerius was supreme in the central provinces, there was no rigid scrutiny of the folk who flowed in a steady stream through the wide gates. Discipline had been relaxed. The Nemedian soldiers who stood on guard were half drunk, and much too busy watching for handsome peasant girls and rich merchants who could be bullied to notice workmen or dusty travelers, even one tall wayfarer whose worn cloak could not conceal the hard lines of his powerful frame. ___This man carried himself with an erect, aggressive bearing that was too natural for him to realize it himself, much less dissemble it. A great patch covered one eye, and his leather coif, drawn low over his brows, shadowed his features. With a long thick staff in his muscular brown hand, he strode leisurely through the arch where the torches flared and guttered, and, ignored by the tipsy guardsmen, emerged upon the wide streets of Tarantia. ___Upon these well-lighted thoroughfares the usual throngs went about their business, and shops and stalls stood open, with their wares displayed. One thread ran a constant theme through the pattern. Nemedian soldiers, singly or in clumps, swaggered through the throngs, shouldering their way with studied arrogance. Women scurried from their path, and men stepped aside with darkened brows and clenched fists. The Aquilonians were a proud race, and these were their hereditary enemies. ___The knuckles of the tall traveler knotted on his staff, but, like the others, he stepped aside to let the men in armor have the way. Among the motley and varied crowd he did not attract much attention in his drab, dusty garments. But once, as he passed a sword-seller's stall and the light that streamed from its wide door fell full upon him, he thought he felt an intense stare upon him, and turning quickly, saw a man in the brown jerkin of a free workman regarding him fixedly. This man turned away with undue haste, and vanished in the shifting throng. But Conan turned into a narrow by-street and quickened his pace. It might have been mere idle curiosity; but he could take no chances. ___The grim Iron Tower stood apart from the citadel, amid a maze of narrow streets and crowding houses where the meaner structures, appropriating a space from which the more fastidious shrank, had invaded a portion of the city ordinarily alien to them. The Tower was in reality a castle, an ancient, formidable pile of heavy stone and black iron, which had itself served as the citadel in an earlier, ruder century. ___Not a long distance from it, lost in a tangle of partly deserted tenements and warehouses, stood an ancient watchtower, so old and forgotten that it did not appear on the maps of the city for a hundred years back. Its original purpose had been forgotten, and nobody, of such as saw it at all, noticed that the apparently ancient lock which kept it from being appropriated as sleeping-quarters by beggars and thieves, was in reality comparatively new and extremely powerful, cunningly disguised into an appearance of rusty antiquity. Not half a dozen men in the kingdom had ever known the secret of that tower. ___No keyhole showed in the massive, green-crustled lock. But Conan's practised fingers, stealing over it, pressed here and there knobs invisible to the casual eye. The door silently opened inward and he entered solid blackness, pushing the door shut behind him. A light would have showed the tower empty, a bare, cylindrical shaft of massive stone. ___Groping in a corner with the sureness of familiarity, he found the projections for which he was feeling on a slab of the stone that composed the floor. Quickly he lifted it, and without hesitation lowered himself into the aperture beneath. His feet felt stone steps leading downward into what

he knew was a narrow tunnel that ran straight toward the foundations of the Iron Tower, three streets away.____The Bell on the citadel, which tolled only at the midnight hour or for the death of a king, boomed suddenly. In a dimly lighted chamber in the Iron Tower a door opened and a form emerged into a corridor. The interior of the Tower was as forbidding as its external appearance. Its massive stone walls were rough, unadorned. The flags of the floor were worn deep by generations of faltering feet, and the vault of the ceiling was gloomy in the dim light of torches set in niches.____The man who trudged down that grim corridor was in appearance in keeping with his surroundings. He was a tall, powerfully built man, clad in close-fitting black silk. Over his head was drawn a black hood which fell about his shoulders, having two holes for his eyes. From his shoulders hung a loose black cloak, and over one shoulder he bore a heavy ax, the shape of which was that of neither tool nor weapon.____As he went down the corridor, a figure came hobbling up it, a bent, surly old man, stooping under the weight of his pike and a lantern he bore in one hand.____'You are not as prompt as your predecessor, master headsman,' he grumbled. 'Midnight has just struck, and masked men have gone to milady's cell. They await you.'____'The tones of the bell still echo among the towers,' answered the executioner. 'If I am not so quick to leap and run at the beck of Aquilonians as was the dog who held this office before me, they shall find my arm no less ready. Get you to your duties, old watchman, and leave me to mine. I think mine is the sweeter trade, by Mitra, for you tramp cold corridors and peer at rusty dungeon doors, while I lop off the fairest head in Tarantia this night.'____The watchman limped on down the corridor, still grumbling, and the headsman resumed his leisurely way. A few strides carried him around a turn in the corridor, and he absently noted that at his left a door stood partly open. If he had thought, he would have known that that door had been opened since the watchman passed; but thinking was not his trade. He was passing the unlocked door before he realized that aught was amiss, and then it was too late.____A soft tigerish step and the rustle of a cloak warned him, but before he could turn, a heavy arm hooked about his throat from behind, crushing the cry before it could reach his lips. In the brief instant that was allowed him he realized with a surge of panic the strength of his attacker, against which his own brawny thews were helpless. He sensed without seeing the poised dagger.____'Nemedian dog!' muttered a voice thick with passion in his ear. 'You've cut off your last Aquilonian head!' And that was the last thing he ever heard.____In a dank dungeon, lighted only by a guttering torch, three men stood about a young woman who knelt on the rush-strewn flags staring wildly up at them. She was clad only in a scanty shift; her golden hair fell in lustrous ripples about her white shoulders, and her wrists were bound behind her. Even in the uncertain torchlight, and in spite of her disheveled condition and pallor of fear, her beauty was striking. She knelt mutely, staring with wide eyes up at her tormenters. The men were closely masked and cloaked. Such a deed as this needed masks, even in a conquered land. She knew them all nevertheless; but what she knew would harm no one - after that night.____'Our merciful sovereign offers you one more chance, Countess,' said the tallest of the three, and he spoke Aquilonian without an accent. 'He bids me say that if you soften your proud, rebellious spirit, he will still open his arms to you. If not?' he gestured toward a grim wooden block in the center of the cell. It was blackly stained, and showed many deep nicks as if a keen edge, cutting through some yielding substance, had sunk into the wood.____Albiona shuddered and

turned pale, shrinking back. Every fiber in her vigorous young body quivered with the urge of life. Valerius was young, too, and handsome. Many women loved him, she told herself, fighting with herself for life. But she could not speak the word that would ransom her soft young body from the block and the dripping ax. She could not reason the matter. She only knew that when she thought of the clasp of Valerius' arms, her flesh crawled with an abhorrence greater than the fear of death. She shook her head helplessly, compelled by an impulsion more irresistible than the instinct to live.____'Then there is no more to be said!' exclaimed one of the others impatiently, and he spoke with a Nemedian accent. 'Where is the headsman?' As if summoned by the word, the dungeon door opened silently, and a great figure stood framed in it, like a black shadow from the underworld.____Albiona voiced a low, involuntary cry at the sight of that grim shape, and the others stared silently for a moment, perhaps themselves daunted with superstitious awe at the silent, hooded figure. Through the coif the eyes blazed like coals of blue fire, and as these eyes rested on each man in turn, he felt a curious chill travel down his spine.____Then the tall Aquilonian roughly seized the girl and dragged her to the block. She screamed uncontrollably and fought hopelessly against him, frantic with terror, but he ruthlessly forced her to her knees, and bent her yellow head down to the bloody block.____'Why do you delay, headsman?' he exclaimed angrily. 'Perform your task!'____He was answered by a short, gusty boom of laughter that was indescribably menacing. All in the dungeon froze in their places, staring at the hooded shape - the two cloaked figures, the masked man bending over the girl, the girl herself on her knees, twisting her imprisoned head to look upward.____'What means this unseemly mirth, dog?' demanded the Aquilonian uneasily.____The man in the black garb tore his hood from his head and flung it to the ground; he set his back to the closed door and lifted the headsman's ax.____'Do you know me, dogs?' he rumbled. 'Do you know me?' The breathless silence was broken by a scream. 'The king!' shrieked Albiona, wrenching herself free from the slackened grasp of her captor. 'Oh, Mitra, the king!'____The three men stood like statues, and then the Aquilonian started and spoke, like a man who doubts his own senses.____'Conan!' he ejaculated. 'It is the king, or his ghost! What devil's work is this?'____'Devil's work to match devils!' mocked Conan, his lips laughing but hell flaming in his eyes. 'Come, fall to, my gentlemen. You have your swords, and I this cleaver. Nay, I think this butcher's tool fits the work at hand, my fair lords!'____'At him!' muttered the Aquilonian, drawing his sword. 'It is Conan and we must kill or be killed!'____And like men waking from a trance, the Nemedians drew their blades and rushed on the king.____The headsman's ax was not made for such work, but the king wielded the heavy, clumsy weapon as lightly as a hatchet, and his quickness of foot, as he constantly shifted his position, defeated their purpose of engaging him all three at once.____He caught the sword of the first man on his ax-head and crushed in the wielder's breast with a murderous counterstroke before he could step back or parry. The remaining Nemedian, missing a savage swipe, had his brains dashed out before he could recover his balance, and an instant later the Aquilonian was backed into a corner, desperately parrying the crashing strokes that rained about him, lacking opportunity even to scream for help.____Suddenly Conan's long left arm shot out and ripped the mask from the man's head, disclosing the pallid features.____'Dog!' grated the king. 'I thought I knew you. Traitor! Damned renegade! Even this base steel is too honorable for your foul head. Nay, die as thieves die!'____The ax fell in a devastating arch,

and the Aquilonian cried out and went to his knees, grasping the severed stump of his right arm from which blood spouted. It had been shorn away at the elbow, and the ax, unchecked in its descent, had gashed deeply into his side, so that his entrails bulged out.____'Lie there and bleed to death,' grunted Conan, casting the ax away disgustedly. 'Come, Countess!'____Stooping, he slashed the cords that bound her wrists and lifting her as if she had been a child, strode from the dungeon. She was sobbing hysterically, with her arms thrown about his corded neck in a frenzied embrace.____'Easy all,' he muttered. 'We're not out of this yet. If we can reach the dungeon where the secret door opens on stairs that lead to the tunnel - devil take it, they've heard that noise, even through these walls.'____Down the corridor arms clanged and the tramp and shouting of men echoed under the vaulted roof. A bent figure came hobbling swiftly along, lantern held high, and its light shone full on Conan and the girl. With a curse the Cimmerian sprang toward him, but the old watchman, abandoning both lantern and pike, scuttled away down the corridor, screeching for help at the top of his cracked voice. Deeper shouts answered him.____Conan turned swiftly and ran the other way. He was cut off from the dungeon with the secret lock and the hidden door through which he had entered the Tower, and by which he had hoped to leave, but he knew this grim building well. Before he was king he had been imprisoned in it.____He turned off into a side passage and quickly emerged into another, broader corridor, which ran parallel to the one down which he had come, and which was at the moment deserted. He followed this only a few yards, when he again turned back, down another side passage. This brought him back into the corridor he had left, but at a strategic point. A few feet farther up the corridor there was a heavy bolted door, and before it stood a bearded Nemedian in corselet and helmet, his back to Conan as he peered up the corridor in the direction of the growing tumult and wildly waving lanterns.____Conan did not hesitate. Slipping the girl to the ground, he ran at the guard swiftly and silently, sword in hand. The man turned just as the king reached him, bawled in surprise and fright and lifted his pike; but before he could bring the clumsy weapon into play, Conan brought down his sword on the fellow's helmet with a force that would have felled an ox. Helmet and skull gave way together and the guard crumpled to the floor.____In an instant Conan had drawn the massive bolt that barred the door - too heavy for one ordinary man to have manipulated - and called hastily to Albiona, who ran staggering to him. Catching her up unceremoniously with one arm, he bore her through the door and into the outer darkness.____They had come into a narrow alley, black as pitch, walled by the side of the Tower on one hand, and the sheer stone back of a row of buildings on the other. Conan, hurrying through the darkness as swiftly as he dared, felt the latter wall for doors or windows, but found none.____The great door clanged open behind them, and men poured out, with torches gleaming on breastplates and naked swords. They glared about, bellowing, unable to penetrate the darkness which their torches served to illuminate for only a few feet in any direction, and then rushed down the alley at random -heading in the direction opposite to that taken by Conan and Albiona.____'They'll learn their mistake quick enough,' he muttered, increasing his pace. If we ever find a crack in this infernal wall - damn! The street watch!'____Ahead of them a faint glow became apparent, where the alley opened into a narrow street, and he saw dim figures looming against it with a glimmer of steel. It was indeed the street watch, investigating the noise they had heard echoing down the alley.____'Who goes there?' they shouted, and

Conan grit his teeth at the hated Nemedian accent. ___'Keep behind me,' he ordered the girl. 'We've got to cut our way through before the prison guards come back and pin us between them.' ___And grasping his sword, he ran straight at the oncoming figures. The advantage of surprise was his. He could see them, limned against the distant glow, and they could not see him coming at them out of the black depths of the alley. He was among them before they knew it, smiting with the silent fury of a wounded lion. ___His one chance lay in hacking through before they could gather their wits. But there were half a score of them, in full mail, hard-bitten veterans of the border wars, in whom the instinct for battle could take the place of bemused wits. Three of them were down before they realized that it was only one man who was attacking them, but even so their reaction was instantaneous. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly, and sparks flew as Conan's sword crashed on basinet and hauberk. He could see better than they, and in the dim light his swiftly moving figure was an uncertain mark. Flailing swords cut empty air or glanced from his blade, and when he struck it was with the fury and certainty of a hurricane. ___But behind him sounded the shouts of the prison guards, returning up the alley at a run, and still the mailed figures before him barred his way with a bristling wall of steel. In an instant the guards would be on his back - in desperation he redoubled his strokes, flailing like a smith on an anvil, and then was suddenly aware of a diversion. Out of nowhere behind the watchmen rose a score of black figures and there was a sound of blows, murderously driven. Steel glinted in the gloom, and men cried out, struck mortally from behind. In an instant the alley was littered with writhing forms. A dark, cloaked shape sprang toward Conan, who heaved up his sword, catching a gleam of steel in the right hand. But the other was extended to him empty and a voice hissed urgently: 'This way, your Majesty! Quickly!' ___With a muttered oath of surprise, Conan caught up Albiona in one massive arm, and followed his unknown befriender. He was not inclined to hesitate, with thirty prison guardsmen closing in behind him. ___Surrounded by mysterious figures he hurried down the alley, carrying the countess as if she had been a child. He could tell nothing of his rescuers except that they wore dark cloaks and hoods. Doubt and suspicion crossed his mind, but at least they had struck down his enemies, and he saw no better course than to follow them. ___As if sensing his doubt, the leader touched his arm lightly and said: 'Fear not, King Conan; we are your loyal subjects.' The voice was not familiar, but the accent was Aquilonian of the central provinces. ___Behind them the guards were yelling as they stumbled over the shambles in the mud, and they came pelting vengefully down the alley, seeing the vague dark mass moving between them and the light of the distant street. But the hooded men turned suddenly toward the seemingly blank wall, and Conan saw a door gape there. He muttered a curse. He had traversed that alley by day, in times past, and had never noticed a door there. But through it they went, and the door closed behind them with the click of a lock. The sound was not reassuring, but his guides were hurrying him on, moving with the precision of familiarity, guiding Conan with a hand at either elbow. It was like traversing a tunnel, and Conan felt Albiona's lithe limbs trembling in his arms. Then somewhere ahead of them an opening was faintly visible, merely a somewhat less black arch in the blackness, and through this they filed. ___After that there was a bewildering succession of dim courts and shadowy alleys and winding corridors, all traversed in utter silence, until at last they emerged into a broad lighted chamber, the location of which Conan could not even guess, for

their devious route had confused even his primitive sense of direction._____10 A Coin From Acheron_____Not all his guides entered the chamber. When the door closed, Conan saw only one man standing before him - a slim figure, masked in a black cloak with a hood. This the man threw back, disclosing a pale oval of a face, with calm, delicately chiselled features.____The king set Albiona on her feet, but she still clung to him and stared apprehensively about her. The chamber was a large one, with marble walls partly covered with black velvet hangings and thick rich carpets on the mosaic floor, laved in the soft golden glow of bronze lamps.____Conan instinctively laid a hand on his hilt. There was blood on his hand, blood clotted about the mouth of his scabbard, for he had sheathed his blade without cleansing it.____'Where are we?' he demanded.____The stranger answered with a low, profound bow in which the suspicious king could detect no trace of irony.____'In the temple of Asura, your Majesty.'____Albiona cried out faintly and clung closer to Conan, staring fearfully at the black, arched doors, as if expecting the entry of some grisly shape of darkness.____'Fear not, my lady,' said their guide. 'There is nothing here to harm you, vulgar superstition to the contrary. If your monarch was sufficiently convinced of the innocence of our religion to protect us from the persecution of the ignorant, then certainly one of his subjects need have no apprehensions.'____'Who are you?' demanded Conan.____'I am Hadrathus, priest of Asura. One of my followers recognized you when you entered the city, and brought the word to me.'____Conan grunted profanely.____'Do not fear that others discovered your identity,' Hadrathus assured him. 'Your disguise would have deceived any but a follower of Asura, whose cult it is to seek below the aspect of illusion. You were followed to the watch tower, and some of my people went into the tunnel to aid you if you returned by that route. Others, myself among them, surrounded the tower. And now, King Conan, it is yours to command. Here in the temple of Asura you are still king.'____'Why should you risk your lives for me?' asked the king.____'You were our friend when you sat upon your throne,' answered Hadrathus. 'You protected us when the priests of Mitra sought to scourge us out of the land.'____Conan looked about him curiously. He had never before visited the temple of Asura, had not certainly known that there was such a temple in Tarantia. The priests of the religion had a habit of hiding their temples in a remarkable fashion. The worship of Mitra was overwhelmingly predominant in the Hyborian nations, but the cult of Asura persisted, in spite of official ban and popular antagonism. Conan had been told dark tales of hidden temples where intense smoke drifted up incessantly from black altars where kidnapped humans were sacrificed before a great coiled serpent, whose fearsome head swayed for ever in the haunted shadows.____Persecution caused the followers of Asura to hide their temples with cunning art, and to veil their rituals in obscurity; and this secrecy, in turn, evoked more monstrous suspicions and tales of evil.____But Conan's was the broad tolerance of the barbarian, and he had refused to persecute the followers of Asura or to allow the people to do so on no better evidence than was presented against them, rumors and accusations that could not be proven. 'If they are black magicians,' he had said, 'how will they suffer you to harry them? If they are not, there is no evil in them. Crom's devils! Let men worship what gods they will.'____At a respectful invitation from Hadrathus he seated himself on an ivory chair, and motioned Albiona to another, but she preferred to sit on a golden stool at his feet, pressing close against his thigh, as if seeking security in the contact. Like most orthodox followers of Mitra,

she had an intuitive horror of the followers and cult of Asura, instilled in her infancy and childhood by wild tales of human sacrifice and anthropomorphic gods shambling through shadowy temples. Hadrathus stood before them, his uncovered head bowed. 'What is your wish, your Majesty?' 'Food first,' he grunted, and the priest smote a golden gong with a silver wand. Scarcely had the mellow notes ceased echoing when four hooded figures came through a curtained doorway bearing a great four-legged silver platter of smoking dishes and crystal vessels. This they set before Conan, bowing low, and the king wiped his hands on the damask, and smacked his lips with unconcealed relish. 'Beware, your Majesty!' whispered Albiona. 'These folk eat human flesh!' 'I'll stake my kingdom that this is nothing but honest roast beef,' answered Conan. 'Come, lass, fall to! You must be hungry after the prison fare.' Thus advised, and with the example before her of one whose word was the ultimate law to her, the countess complied, and ate ravenously though daintily, while her liege lord tore into the meat joints and guzzled the wine with as much gusto as if he had not already eaten once that night. 'You priests are shrewd, Hadrathus,' he said, with a great beef-bone in his hands and his mouth full of meat. 'I'd welcome your service in my campaign to regain my kingdom.' Slowly Hadrathus shook his head, and Conan slammed the beef-bone down on the table in a gust of impatient wrath. 'Crom's devils! What ails the men of Aquilonia? First Servius - now you! Can you do nothing but wag your idiotic heads when I speak of ousting these dogs?' Hadrathus sighed and answered slowly: 'My lord, it is ill to say, and I fain would say otherwise. But the freedom of Aquilonia is at an end. Nay, the freedom of the whole world may be at an end! Age follows age in the history of the world, and now : enter an age of horror and slavery, as it was long ago.' 'What do you mean?' demanded the king uneasily. Hadrathus dropped into a chair and rested his elbows on his thighs, staring at the floor. 'It is not alone the rebellious lords of Aquilonia and the armies of Nemedra which are arrayed against you,' answered Hadrathus. 'It is sorcery - grisly black magic from the grim youth of the world. An awful shape has risen out of the shades of the Past, and none can stand before it.' 'What do you mean?' Conan repeated. 'I speak of Xaltotun of Acheron, who died three thousand years ago, yet walks the earth today.' Conan was silent, while in his mind floated an image - the image of a bearded face of calm inhuman beauty. Again he was haunted by a sense of uneasy familiarity. Acheron - the sound of the word roused instinctive vibrations of memory and associations in his mind. 'Acheron,' he repeated. 'Xaltotun of Acheron - man, are you mad? Acheron has been a myth for more centuries than I can remember. I've often wondered if it ever existed at all.' 'It was a black reality,' answered Hadrathus, 'an empire of black magicians, steeped in evil now long forgotten. It was finally overthrown by the Hyborian tribes of the west. The wizards of Acheron practised foul necromancy, thaumaturgy of the most evil kind, grisly magic taught them by devils. And of all the sorcerers of that accursed kingdom, none was so great as Xaltotun of Python.' 'Then how was he ever overthrown?' asked Conan skeptically. 'By some means a source of cosmic power which he jealously guarded was stolen and turned against him. That source has been returned to him, and he is invincible.' Albiona, hugging the headsman's black cloak about her, stared from the priest to the king, not understanding the conversation. Conan shook his head angrily. 'You are making game of me,' he growled. 'If Xaltotun has been dead three thousand years, how can this man be he? It's some rogue who's taken the old one's name.' Hadrathus leaned to an ivory table

and opened a small gold chest which stood there. From it he took something which glinted dully in the mellow light - a broad gold coin of antique minting.____'You have seen Xaltotun unveiled? Then look upon this. It is a coin which was stamped in ancient Acheron, before its fall. So pervaded with sorcery was that black empire, that even this coin has its uses in making magic.'____Conan took it and scowled down at it. There was no mistaking its great antiquity. Conan had handled many coins in the years of his plunderings, and had a good practical knowledge of them. The edges were worn and the inscription almost obliterated. But the countenance stamped on one side was still clear-cut and distinct. And Conan's breath sucked in between his clenched teeth. It was not cool in the chamber, but he felt a prickling of his scalp, an icy contraction of his flesh. The countenance was that of a bearded man, inscrutable, with a calm inhuman beauty.____'By Crom! It's he!' muttered Conan. He understood, now, the sense of familiarity that the sight of the bearded man had roused in him from the first. He had seen a coin like this once before, long ago in a far land.____With a shake of his shoulders he growled: 'The likeness is only a coincidence - or if he's shrewd enough to assume a forgotten wizard's name, he's shrewd enough to assume his likeness.' But he spoke without conviction. The sight of that coin had shaken the foundations of his universe. He felt that reality and stability were crumbling into an abyss of illusion and sorcery. A wizard was understandable; but this was diabolism beyond sanity.____'We cannot doubt that it is indeed Xaltotun of Python,' said Hadrathus. 'He it was who shook down the cliffs at Valkia, by his spells that enthrall the elementals of the earth - he it was who sent the creature of darkness into your tent before dawn.'____Conan scowled at him. 'How did you know that?'____'The followers of Asura have secret channels of knowledge. That does not matter. But do you realize the futility of sacrificing your subjects in a vain attempt to regain your crown?'____Conan rested his chin on his fist, and stared grimly into nothing. Albiona watched him anxiously, her mind groping bewildered in the mazes of the problem that confronted him.____'Is there no wizard in the world who could make magic to fight Xaltotun's magic?' he asked at last.____Hadrathus shook his head. 'If there were, we of Asura would know of him. Men say our cult is a survival of the ancient Stygian serpent-worship. That is a lie. Our ancestors came from Vendhya, beyond the Sea of Vilayet and the blue Himelian mountains. We are sons of the East, not the South, and we have knowledge of all the wizards of the East, who are greater than the wizards of the West. And not one of them but would be a straw in the wind before the black might of Xaltotun.'____'But he was conquered once,' persisted Conan.____'Aye; a cosmic source was turned against him. But now that source is again in his hands, and he will see that it is not stolen again.'____'And what is this damnable source?' demanded Conan irritably.____'It is called the Heart of Ahriman. When Acheron was overthrown, the primitive priest who had stolen it and turned it against Xaltotun hid it in a haunted cavern and built a small temple over the cavern. Thrice thereafter the temple was rebuilt, each time greater and more elaborately than before, but always on the site of the original shrine, though men forgot the reason therefor. Memory of the hidden symbol faded from the minds of common men, and was preserved only in priestly books and esoteric volumes. Whence it came no one knows. Some say it is the veritable heart of a god, others that it is a star that fell from the skies long ago. Until it was stolen, none had looked upon it for three thousand years.____'When the magic of the Mitran priests failed against the magic of Xaltotun's acolyte, Altaro, they remembered the ancient legend of

the heart, and the high priest and an acolyte went down into the dark and terrible crypt below the temple into which no priest had descended for three thousand years. In the ancient iron-bound volumes which speak of the Heart in their cryptic symbolism, it is also told of a creature of darkness left by the ancient priest to guard it.____'Far down in a square chamber with arched doorways leading off into immeasurable blackness, the priest and his acolytes found a black stone altar that glowed dimly with inexplicable radiance.____'On that altar lay a curious gold vessel like a double-valved sea-shell which clung to the stone like a barnacle. But it gaped open and empty. The Heart of Ahriman was gone. While they stared in horror, the keeper of the crypt, the creature of darkness, came upon them and mangled the high priest so that he died. But the acolyte fought off the being - a mindless, soulless waif of the pits brought long ago to guard the Heart -and escaped up the long black narrow stairs carrying the dying priest, who before he died, gasped out the news to his followers, bade them submit to a power they could not overcome, and commanded secrecy. But the word has been whispered about among the priests, and we of Asura learned of it.'____'And Xaltotun draws his power from this symbol?' asked Conan, still skeptical.____'No. His power is drawn from the black gulf. But the Heart of Ahriman came from some far universe of flaming light, and against it the powers of darkness cannot stand, when it is in the hands of an adept. It is like a sword that might smite at him, not a sword with which he can smite. It restores life, and can destroy life. He has stolen it, not to use against his enemies, but to keep them from using it against him.'____'A shell-shaped bowl of gold on a black altar in a deep cavern,' Conan muttered, frowning as he sought to capture the illusive image. 'That reminds me of something I have heard or seen. But what, in Crom's name, is this notable Heart?'____'It is in the form of a great jewel, like a ruby, but pulsing with blinding fire with which no ruby ever burned. It glows like living flame?'____But Conan sprang suddenly up and smote his right fist into his left palm like a thunderclap.____'Crom!' he roared, 'What a fool I've been! The Heart of Ahriman! The heart of my kingdom! Find the heart of my kingdom, Zelata said. By Ymir, it was the jewel I saw in the green smoke, the jewel which Tarascus stole from Xaltotun while he lay in the sleep of the black lotus!'____Hadrathus was also on his feet, his calm dropped from him like a garment.____'What are you saying? The Heart stolen from Xaltotun?' 'Aye!' Conan boomed. 'Tarascus feared Xaltotun and wanted to cripple his power, which he thought resided in the Heart.____Maybe he thought the wizard would die if the Heart was lost. By Crom - ahhh!' With a savage grimace of disappointment and disgust he dropped his clenched hand to his side.____'I forgot. Tarascus gave it to a thief to throw into the sea. By this time the fellow must be almost to Kordava. Before I can follow him he'll take ship and consign the Heart to the bottom of the ocean.'____'The sea will not hold it!' exclaimed Hadrathus, quivering with excitement. 'Xaltotun would himself have cast it into the ocean long ago, had he not known that the first storm would carry it ashore. But on what unknown beach might it not land!'____'Well,' Conan was recovering some of his resilient confidence, 'there's no assurance that the thief will throw it away. If I know thieves - and I should, for I was a thief in Zamora in my early youth - he won't throw it away. He'll sell it to some rich trader. By Crom!' he strode back and forth in his growing excitement. 'It's worth looking for! Zelata bade me find the heart of my kingdom, and all else she showed me proved to be truth. Can it be that the power to conquer Xaltotun lurks in that crimson bauble?'____'Aye! My head upon it!' cried

Hadrathus, his face lightened with fervor, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched. 'With it in our hands we can dare the powers of Xaltotun! I swear it! If we can recover it, we have an even chance of recovering your crown and driving the invaders from our portals. It is not the swords of Nemedea that Aquilonia fears, but the black arts of Xaltotun.'___Conan looked at him for a space, impressed by the priest's fire.___'It's like a quest in a nightmare,' he said at last. 'Yet your words echo the thought of Zelata, and all else she said was truth. I'll seek for this jewel.'___'It holds the destiny of Aquilonia,' said Hadrathus with conviction. 'I will send men with you?'___'Nay!' exclaimed the king impatiently, not caring to be hampered by priests on his quest, however skilled in esoteric arts. 'This is a task for a fighting man. I go alone. First to Poitain, where I'll leave Albiona with Trocero. Then to Kordava, and to the sea beyond, if necessary. It may be that, even if the thief intends carrying out Tarascus' order, he'll have some difficulty finding an outbound ship at this time of the year.'___'And if you find the Heart,' cried Hadrathus, 'I will prepare the way for your conquest. Before you return to Aquilonia I will spread the word through secret channels that you live and are returning with a magic stronger than Xaltotun's. I will have men ready to rise on your return. They will rise, if they have assurance that they will be protected from the black arts of Xaltotun.'___'And I will aid you on your journey.'___He rose and struck a gong.___'A secret tunnel leads from beneath this temple to a place outside the city wall. You shall go to Poitain on a pilgrim's boat. None will dare molest you.'___'As you will.' With a definite purpose in mind Conan was afire with impatience and dynamic energy. 'Only let it be done swiftly.'___In the meantime events were moving not slowly elsewhere in the city. A breathless messenger had burst into the palace where Valerius was amusing himself with his dancing-girls, and throwing himself on his knee, gasped out a garbled story of a bloody prison break and the escape of a lovely captive. He bore also the news that Count Thespius, to whom the execution of Albiona's sentence had been entrusted, was dying and begging for a word with Valerius before he passed.___Hurriedly cloaking himself, Valerius accompanied the man through various winding ways, and came to a chamber where Thespius lay. There was no doubt that the count was dying; bloody froth bubbled from his lips at each shuddering gasp. His severed arm had been bound to stop the flow of blood, but even without that, the gash in his side was mortal.___Alone in the chamber with the dying man, Valerius swore softly.___'By Mitra, I had believed that only one man ever lived who could strike such a blow.'___'Valerius!' gasped the dying man. 'He lives! Conan lives!'___'What are you saying?' ejaculated the other.___'I swear by Mitra!' gurgled Thespius, gagging on the blood that gushed to his lips. 'It was he who carried off Albiona! He is not dead - no phantom come back from hell to haunt us. He is flesh and blood, and more terrible than ever. The alley behind the tower is full of dead men. Beware, Valerius - he has come back - to slay us all?'___A strong shudder shook the blood-smeared figure, and Count Thespius went limp.___Valerius frowned down at the dead man, cast a swift glance about the empty chamber, and stepping swiftly to the door, cast it open suddenly. The messenger and a group of Nemedian guardsmen stood several paces down the corridor. Valerius muttered something that might have indicated satisfaction.___'Have all the gates been closed?' he demanded.___'Yes, your Majesty.'___'Triple the guards at each. Let no one enter or leave the city without strictest investigation. Set men scouring the streets and searching the quarters. A very valuable prisoner has escaped, with

the aid of an Aquilonian rebel. Did any of you recognize the man?'___'No, your Majesty. The old watchman had a glimpse of him, but could only say that he was a giant, clad in the black garb of the executioner, whose naked body we found in an empty cell.'___'He is a dangerous man,' said Valerius. 'Take no chances with him. You all know the Countess Albiona. Search for her, and if you find her, kill her and her companion instantly. Do not try to take them alive.'___Returning to his palace chamber, Valerius summoned before him four men of curious and alien aspect. They were tall, gaunt, of yellowish skin, and immobile countenances. They were very similar in appearance, clad alike in long black robes beneath which their sandaled feet were just visible. Their features were shadowed by their hoods. They stood before Valerius with their hands in their wide sleeves; their arms folded. Valerius looked at them without pleasure. In his far journeyings he had encountered many strange races.___'When I found you starving in the Khitan jungles,' he said abruptly, 'exiles from your kingdom, you swore to serve me. You have served me well enough, in your abominable way. One more service I require, and then I set you free of your oath.'___'Conan the Cimmerian, king of Aquilonia, still lives, in spite of Xaltotun's sorcery - or perhaps because of it. I know not. The dark mind of that resurrected devil is too devious and subtle for a mortal man to fathom. But while Conan lives I am not safe. The people accepted me as the lesser of two evils, when they thought he was dead. Let him reappear and the throne will be rocking under my feet in revolution before I can lift my hand.'___'Perhaps my allies mean to use him to replace me, if they decide I have served my purpose. I do not know. I do know that this planet is too small for two kings of Aquilonia. Seek the Cimmerian. Use your uncanny talents to ferret him out wherever he hides or runs. He has many friends in Tarantia. He had aid when he carried off Albiona. It took more than one man, even such a man as Conan, to wreak all that slaughter in the alley outside the tower. But no more. Take your staffs and strike his trail. Where that trail will lead you, I know not. But find him! And when you find him, slay him!'___The four Khitans bowed together, and still unspeaking, turned and padded noiselessly from the chamber._____11
Swords of the South___Dawn that rose over the distant hills shone on the sails of a small craft that dropped down the river which curves to within a mile of the walls of Tarantia, and loops southward like a great shining serpent. This boat differed from the ordinary craft plying the broad Khorotas - fishermen and merchant barges loaded with rich goods. It was long and slender, with a high, curving prow, and was black as ebony, with white skulls painted along the gunwales. Amidships rose a small cabin, the windows closely masked. Other craft gave the ominously painted boat a wide berth; for it was obviously one of those 'pilgrim boats' that carried a lifeless follower of Asura on his last mysterious pilgrimage southward to where, far beyond the Poitanian mountains, a river flowed at last into the blue ocean. In that cabin undoubtedly lay the corpse of the departed worshipper. All men were familiar with the sight of those gloomy craft; and the most fanatical votary of Mitra would not dare touch or interfere with their somber voyages.___Where the ultimate destination lay, men did not know. Some said Stygia; some a nameless island lying beyond the horizon; others said it was in the glamorous and mysterious land of Vendhya where the dead came home at last. But none knew certainly. They only knew that when a follower of Asura died, the corpse went southward down the great river, in a black boat rowed by a giant slave, and neither boat nor corpse nor slave was ever seen again; unless, indeed, certain dark tales were true, and it

was always the same slave who rowed the boats southward.____The man who propelled this particular boat was as huge and brown as the others, though closer scrutiny might have revealed the fact that the hue was the result of carefully applied pigments. He was clad in leather loin-clout and sandals, and he handled the long sweep and oars with unusual skill and power. But none approached the grim boat closely, for it was well known that the followers of Asura were accursed, and that these pilgrim boats were loaded with dark magic. So men swung their boats wide and muttered an incantation as the dark craft slid past, and they never dreamed that they were thus assisting in the flight of their king and the Countess Albiona.____It was a strange journey, in that black, slim craft down the great river for nearly two hundred miles to where the Khorotas swings eastward, skirting the Poitanian mountains. Like a dream the ever-changing panorama glided past. During the day Albiona lay patiently in the little cabin, as quietly as the corpse she pretended to be. Only late at night, after the pleasure boats with their fair occupants lounging on silken cushions in the flare of torches held by slaves had left the river, before dawn brought the hurrying fisherboats, did the girl venture out. Then she held the long sweep, cunningly bound in place by ropes to aid her, while Conan snatched a few hours of sleep. But the king needed little rest. The fire of his desire drove him relentlessly; and his powerful frame was equal to the grinding test. Without halt or pause they drove southward.____So down the river they fled, through nights when the flowing current mirrored the million stars, and through days of golden sunlight, leaving winter behind them as they sped southward. They passed cities in the night, above which throbbed and pulsed the reflection of the myriad lights, lordly river villas and fertile groves. So at last the blue mountains of Poitain rose above them, tier above tier, like ramparts of the gods, and the great river, swerving from those turreted cliffs, swept thunderously through the marching hills with many a rapid and foaming cataract.____Conan scanned the shore-line closely, and finally swung the long sweep and headed inshore at a point where a neck of land jutted into the water, and fir trees grew in a curiously symmetrical ring about a gray, strangely shaped rock.____'How these boats ride those falls we hear roaring ahead of us is more than I can see,' he grunted. 'Hadrathus said they did -but here's where we halt. He said a man would be waiting for us with horses, but I don't see anyone. How word of our coming could have preceded us I don't know anyway.'____He drove inshore and bound the prow to an arching root in the low bank, and then, plunging into the water, washed the brown paint from his skin and emerged dripping, and in his natural color. From the cabin he brought forth a suit of Aquilonian ring-mail which Hadrathus had procured for him, and his sword. These he donned while Albiona put on garments suitable for mountain travel. And when Conan was fully armed, and turned to look toward the shore, he started and his hand went to his sword. For on the shore, under the trees, stood a black-cloaked figure holding the reins of a white palfrey and a bay war-horse.____'Who are you?' demanded the king.____The other bowed low.____'A follower of Asura. A command came. I obeyed.'____'How, "came"?' inquired Conan, but the other merely bowed again.____'I have come to guide you through the mountains to the first Poitanian stronghold.'____'I don't need a guide,' answered Conan. 'I know these hills well. I thank you for the horses, but the countess and I will attract less attention alone than if we were accompanied by an acolyte of Asura.'____The man bowed profoundly, and giving the reins into Conan's hands, stepped into the boat. Casting off, he floated down

the swift current, toward the distant roar of the unseen rapids. With a baffled shake of his head, Conan lifted the countess into the palfrey's saddle, and then mounted the war-horse and reined toward the summits that castellated the sky.____The rolling country at the foot of the towering mountains was now a borderland, in a state of turmoil, where the barons reverted to feudal practises, and bands of outlaws roamed unhindered. Poitain had not formally declared her separation from Aquilonia, but she was now, to all intents, a self-contained kingdom, ruled by her hereditary count, Trocero. The rolling south country had submitted nominally to Valerius, but he had not attempted to force the passes guarded by strongholds where the crimson leopard banner of Poitain waved defiantly.____The king and his fair companion rode up the long blue slopes in the soft evening. As they mounted higher, the rolling country spread out like a vast purple mantle far beneath them, shot with the shine of rivers and lakes, the yellow glint of broad fields, and the white gleam of distant towers. Ahead of them and far above, they glimpsed the first of the Poitanian holds - a strong fortress dominating a narrow pass, the crimson banner streaming against the clear blue sky.____Before they reached it, a band of knights in burnished armor rode from among the trees, and their leader sternly ordered the travelers to halt. They were tall men, with the dark eyes and raven locks of the south.____'Halt, sir, and state your business, and why you ride toward Poitain.'____'Is Poitain in revolt then,' asked Conan, watching the other closely, 'that a man in Aquilonian harness is halted and questioned like a foreigner?'____'Many rogues ride out of Aquilonia these days,' answered the other coldly. 'As for revolt, if you mean the repudiation of a usurper, then Poitain is in revolt. We had rather serve the memory of a dead man than the scepter of a living dog.'____Conan swept off his helmet, and shaking back his black mane, stared full at the speaker. The Poitanian stared violently and went livid.____'Saints of heaven!' he gasped. 'It is the king - alive?____The others stared wildly, then a roar of wonder and joy burst from them. They swarmed about Conan, shouting their war-cries and brandishing their swords in their extreme emotion. The acclaim of Poitanian warriors was a thing to terrify a timid man.____'Oh, but Trocero will weep tears of joy to see you, sire!' cried one.____'Aye, and Prospero!' shouted another. 'The general has been like one wrapped in a mantle of melancholy, and curses himself night and day that he did not reach the Valkia in time to die beside his king!'____'Now we will strike for empery!' yelled another, whirling his great sword about his head. 'Hail, Conan, king of Poitain!'____The clangor of bright steel about him and the thunder of their acclaim frightened the birds that rose in gay-hued clouds from the surrounding trees. The hot southern blood was afire, and they desired nothing but for their new-found sovereign to lead them to battle and pillage.____'What is your command, sire?' they cried. 'Let one of us ride ahead and bear the news of your coming into Poitain! Banners will wave from every tower, roses will carpet the road before your horse's feet, and all the beauty and chivalry of the south will give you the honor due you?'____Conan shook his head.____'Who could doubt your loyalty? But winds blow over these mountains into the countries of my enemies, and I would rather these didn't know that I lived - yet. Take me to Trocero, and keep my identity a secret.'____So what the knights would have made a triumphal procession was more in the nature of a secret flight. They traveled in haste, speaking to no one, except for a whisper to the captain on duty at each pass; and Conan rode among them with his vizor lowered.____The mountains were uninhabited save by outlaws and garrisons of soldiers who guarded the

passes. The pleasure-loving Poitainians had no need nor desire to wrest a hard and scanty living from their stern breasts. South of the ranges the rich and beautiful plains of Poitain stretched to the river Alimane; but beyond the river lay the land of Zingara.____Even now, when winter was crisping the leaves beyond the mountains, the tall rich grass waved upon the plains where grazed the horses and cattle for which Poitain was famed. Palm trees and orange groves smiled in the sun, and the gorgeous purple and gold and crimson towers of castles and cities reflected the golden light. It was a land of warmth and plenty, of beautiful men and ferocious warriors. It is not only the hard lands that breed hard men. Poitain was surrounded by covetous neighbors and her sons learned hardihood in incessant wars. To the north the land was guarded by the mountains, but to the south only the Alimane separated the plains of Poitain from the plains of Zingara, and not once but a thousand times had that river run red. To the east lay Argos and beyond that Ophir, proud kingdoms and avaricious. The knights of Poitain held their lands by the weight and edge of their swords, and little of ease and idleness they knew.____So Conan came presently to the castle of Count Trocero ...____Conan sat on a silken divan in a rich chamber whose filmy curtains the warm breeze billowed. Trocero paced the floor like a panther, a lithe, restless man with the waist of a woman and the shoulders of a swordsman, who carried his years lightly.____'Let us proclaim you king of Poitain!' urged the count. 'Let those northern pigs wear the yoke to which they have bent their necks. The south is still yours. Dwell here and rule us, amid the flowers and the palms.'____But Conan shook his head. 'There is no nobler land on earth than Poitain. But it cannot stand alone, bold as are its sons.'____'It did stand alone for generations,' retorted Trocero, with the quick jealous pride of his breed. 'We were not always a part of Aquilonia.'____'I know. But conditions are not as they were then, when all kingdoms were broken into principalities which warred with each other. The days of dukedoms and free cities are past, the days of empires are upon us. Rulers are dreaming imperial dreams, and only in unity is there strength.'____'Then let us unite Zingara with Poitain,' argued Trocero. 'Half a dozen princes strive against each other, and the country is torn asunder by civil wars. We will conquer it, province by province, and add it to your dominions. Then with the aid of the Zingarans we will conquer Argos and Ophir. We will build an empire?'____Again Conan shook his head. 'Let others dream imperial dreams. I but wish to hold what is mine. I have no desire to rule an empire welded together by blood and fire. It's one thing to seize a throne with the aid of its subjects and rule them with their consent. It's another to subjugate a foreign realm and rule it by fear. I don't wish to be another Valerius. No, Trocero, I'll rule all Aquilonia and no more, or I'll rule nothing.'____'Then lead us over the mountains and we will smite the Nemedians.'____Conan's fierce eyes glowed with appreciation.____'No, Trocero. It would be a vain sacrifice. I've told you what I must do to regain my kingdom. I must find the Heart of Ahriman.'____'But this is madness!' protested Trocero, 'The maunderings of a heretical priest, the mumblings of a mad witch-woman.'____'You were not in my tent before Valkia,' answered Conan grimly, involuntarily glancing at his right wrist, on which blue marks still showed faintly. 'You didn't see the cliffs thunder down to crush the flower of my army. No, Trocero, I've been convinced. Xaltotun's no mortal man, and only with the Heart of Ahriman can I stand against him. So I'm riding to Kordava, alone.'____'But that is dangerous,' protested Trocero.____'Life is dangerous,' rumbled the king. 'I won't go as king of Aquilonia, or

even as a knight of Poitain, but as a wandering mercenary, as I rode in Zingara in the old days. Oh, I have enemies enough south of the Alimane, in the lands and the waters of the south. Many who won't know me as king of Aquilonia will remember me as Conan of the Barachan pirates, or Amra of the black corsairs. But I have friends, too, and men who'll aid me for their own private reasons.' A faintly reminiscent grin touched his lips.____Trocerero dropped his hands helplessly and glanced at Albiona, who sat on a near-by divan.____'I understand your doubts, my lord,' said she. 'But I too saw the coin in the temple of Asura, and look you, Hadrathus said it was dated five hundred years before the fall of Acheron. If Xaltotun, then, is the man pictured on the coin, as his Majesty swears he is, that means he was no common wizard, even in his other life, for the years of his life were numbered by centuries, not as the lives of other men are numbered.'____Before Trocerero could reply, a respectful rap was heard on the door and a voice called: 'My lord, we have caught a man skulking about the castle, who says he wishes to speak with your guest. I await your orders.'____'A spy from Aquilonia!' hissed Trocerero, catching at his dagger, but Conan lifted his voice and called: 'Open the door and let me see him.'____The door was opened and a man was framed in it, grasped on either hand by stern-looking men-at-arms. He was a slender man, clad in a dark hooded robe.____'Are you a follower of Asura?' asked Conan.____The man nodded, and the stalwart men-at-arms looked shocked and glanced hesitantly at Trocerero.____'The word came southward,' said the man. 'Beyond the Alimane we can not aid you, for our sect goes no farther southward, but stretches eastward with the Khorotas. But this I have learned: the thief who took the Heart of Ahriman from Tarascus never reached Kordava. In the mountains of Poitain he was slain by robbers. The jewel fell into the hands of their chief, who, not knowing its true nature, and being harried after the destruction of his band by Poitanian knights, sold it to the Kothic merchant Zorathus.'____'Ha!' Conan was on his feet, galvanized. 'And what of Zorathus?'____'Four days ago he crossed the Alimane, headed for Argos, with a small band of armed servants.____'He's a fool to cross Zingara in such times,' said Trocerero.____'Aye, times are troublous across the river. But Zorathus is a bold man, and reckless in his way. He is in great haste to reach Messantia, where he hopes to find a buyer for the jewel. Perhaps he hopes to sell it finally in Stygia. Perhaps he guesses at its true nature. At any rate, instead of following the long road that winds along the borders of Poitain and so at last comes into Argos far from Messantia, he has struck straight across eastern Zingara, following the shorter and more direct route.'____Conan smote the table with his clenched fist so that the great board quivered.____'Then, by Crom, fortune has at last thrown the dice for me! A horse, Trocerero, and the harness of a Free Companion! Zorathus has a long start, but not too long for me to overtake him, if I follow him to the end of the world!'_____12 The Fang of the Dragon_____At dawn Conan waded his horse across the shallows of the Alimane and struck the wide caravan trail which ran southeastward, and behind him, on the farther bank, Trocerero sat his horse silently at the head of his steel-clad knights, with the crimson leopard of Poitain floating its long folds over him in the morning breeze. Silently they sat, those dark-haired men in shining steel, until the figure of their king had vanished in the blue of distance that whitened toward sunrise.____Conan rode a great black stallion, the gift of Trocerero. He no longer wore the armor of Aquilonia. His harness proclaimed him a veteran of the Free Companies, who were of all races. His headpiece was a plain morion, dented and

battered. The leather and mail-mesh of his hauberk were worn and shiny as if by many campaigns, and the scarlet cloak flowing carelessly from his mailed shoulders was tattered and stained. He looked the part of the hired fighting-man, who had known all vicissitudes of fortune, plunder and wealth one day, an empty purse and a close-drawn belt the next. ___And more than looking the part, he felt the part; the awakening of old memories, the resurgence of the wild, mad, glorious days of old before his feet were set on the imperial path when he was a wandering mercenary, roistering, brawling, guzzling, adventuring, with no thought for the morrow, and no desire save sparkling ale, red lips, and a keen sword to swing on all the battlefields of the world. ___Unconsciously he reverted to the old ways; a new swagger became evident in his bearing, in the way he sat his horse; half-forgotten oaths rose naturally to his lips, and as he rode he hummed old songs that he had roared in chorus with his reckless companions in many a tavern and on many a dusty road or bloody field. ___It was an unquiet land through which he rode. The companies of cavalry which usually patrolled the river, alert for raids out of Poitain, were nowhere in evidence. Internal strife had left the borders unguarded. The long white road stretched bare from horizon to horizon. No laden camel trains or rumbling wagons or lowing herds moved along it now; only occasional groups of horsemen in leather and steel, hawk-faced, hard-eyed men, who kept together and rode warily. These swept Conan with their searching gaze but rode on, for the solitary rider's harness promised no plunder, but only hard strokes. ___Villages lay in ashes and deserted, the fields and meadows idle. Only the boldest would ride the roads these days, and the native population had been decimated in the civil wars, and by raids from across the river. In more peaceful times the road was thronged with merchants riding Poitain to Messantia in Argos, or back. But now these found it wiser to follow the road that led east through Poitain, and then turned south down across Argos. It was longer, but safer. Only an extremely reckless man would risk his life and goods on this road through Zingara. ___The southern horizon was fringed with flame by night, and in the day straggling pillars of smoke drifted upward; in the cities and plains to the south men were dying, thrones were toppling and castles going up in flames. Conan felt the old tug of the professional fighting-man, to turn his horse and plunge into the fighting, the pillaging and the looting as in the days of old. Why should he toil to regain the rule of a people which had already forgotten him? - why chase a will-o'-the-wisp, why pursue a crown that was lost for ever? Why should he not seek forgetfulness, lose himself in the red tides of war and rapine that had engulfed him so often before? Could he not, indeed, carve out another kingdom for himself? The world was entering an age of iron, an age of war and imperialistic ambition; some strong man might well rise above the ruins of nations as a supreme conqueror. Why should it not be himself? So his familiar devil whispered in his ear, and the phantoms of his lawless and bloody past crowded upon him. But he did not turn aside; he rode onward, following a quest that grew dimmer and dimmer as he advanced, until sometimes it seemed that he pursued a dream that never was. ___He pushed the black stallion as hard as he dared, but the long white road lay bare before him, from horizon to horizon. It was a long start Zorathus had, but Conan rode steadily on, knowing that he was traveling faster than the burdened merchants could travel. And so he came to the castle of Count Valbroso, perched like a vulture's eyrie on a bare hill overlooking the road. ___Valbroso rode down with his men-at-arms, a lean, dark man with glittering eyes and a predatory beak of a nose. He wore black plate-armor and was followed by thirty spearmen,

black-mustached hawks of the border wars, as avaricious and ruthless as himself. Of late the toll of the caravans had been slim, and Valbroso cursed the civil wars that stripped the roads of their fat traffic, even while he blessed them for the free hand they allowed him with his neighbors. ___He had not hoped much from the solitary rider he had glimpsed from his tower, but all was grist that came to his mill. With a practised eye he took in Conan's worn mail and dark, scarred face, and his conclusions were the same as those of the riders who had passed the Cimmerian on the road - an empty purse and a ready blade. ___'Who are you, knave?' he demanded. ___'A mercenary, riding for Argos,' answered Conan. 'What matter names?' ___'You are riding in the wrong direction for a Free Companion,' grunted Valbroso. 'Southward the fighting is good and also the plundering. Join my company. You won't go hungry. The road remains bare of fat merchants to strip, but I mean to take my rogues and fare southward to sell our swords to whichever side seems strongest.' ___Conan did not at once reply, knowing that if he refused outright, he might be instantly attacked by Valbroso's men-at-arms. Before he could make up his mind, the Zingaran spoke again: ___'You rogues of the Free Companies always know tricks to make men talk. I have a prisoner - the last merchant I caught, by Mitra, and the only one I've seen for a week - and the knave is stubborn. He has an iron box, the secret of which defies us, and I've been unable to persuade him to open it. By Ishtar, I thought I knew all the modes of persuasion there are, but perhaps you, as a veteran Free Companion, know some that I do not. At any rate come with me and see what you may do.' ___Valbroso's words instantly decided Conan. That sounded a great deal like Zorathus. Conan did not know the merchant, but any man who was stubborn enough to try to traverse the Zingaran road in times like these would very probably be stubborn enough to defy torture. ___He fell in beside Valbroso and rode up the straggling road to the top of the hill where the gaunt castle stood. As a man-at-arms he should have ridden behind the count, but force of habit made him careless and Valbroso paid no heed. Years of life on the border had taught the count that the frontier is not the royal court. He was aware of the independence of the mercenaries, behind whose swords many a king had trodden the throne-path. ___There was a dry moat, half filled with debris in some places. They clattered across the drawbridge and through the arch of the gate. Behind them the portcullis fell with a sullen clang. They came into a bare courtyard, grown with straggling grass, and with a well in the middle. Shacks for the men-at-arms straggled about the bailey wall, and women, slatternly or decked in gaudy finery, looked from the doors. Fighting-men in rusty mail tossed dice on the flags under the arches. It was more like a bandit's hold than the castle of a nobleman. ___Valbroso dismounted and motioned Conan to follow him. They went through a doorway and along a vaulted corridor, where they were met by a scarred, hard-looking man in mail descending a stone staircase - evidently the captain of the guard. ___'How, Beloso,' quoth Valbroso; 'has he spoken?' ___'He is stubborn,' muttered Beloso, shooting a glance of suspicion at Conan. ___Valbroso ripped out an oath and stamped furiously up the winding stair, followed by Conan and the captain. As they mounted, the groans of a man in mortal agony became audible. Valbroso's torture-room was high above the court, instead of in a dungeon below. In that chamber, where a gaunt, hairy beast of a man in leather breeks squatted gnawing a beef-bone voraciously, stood the machines of torture - racks, boots, hooks and all the implements that the human mind devises to tear flesh, break bones and rend and rupture veins and ligaments. ___On a rack a man was stretched naked, and

a glance told Conan that he was dying. The unnatural elongation of his limbs and body told of unhinged joints and unnamable ruptures. He was a dark man, with an intelligent, aquiline face and quick dark eyes. They were glazed and bloodshot now with pain, and the dew of agony glistened on his face. His lips were drawn back from blackened gums.____'There is the box.' Viciously Valbroso kicked a small but heavy iron chest that stood on the floor near by. It was intricately carved, with tiny skulls and writhing dragons curiously intertwined, but Conan saw no catch or hasp that might serve to unlock the lid. The marks of fire, of ax and sledge and chisel showed on it but as scratches.____'This is the dog's treasure box,' said Valbroso angrily. 'All men of the south know of Zorathus and his iron chest. Mitra knows what is in it. But he will not give up its secret.'____Zorathus! It was true, then; the man he sought lay before him. Conan's heart beat suffocatingly as he leaned over the writhing form, though he exhibited no evidence of his painful eagerness.____'Ease those ropes, knave!' he ordered the torturer harshly, and Valbroso and his captain stared. In the forgetfulness of the moment Conan had used his imperial tone, and the brute in leather instinctively obeyed the knife-edge of command in that voice. He eased away gradually, for else the slackening of the ropes had been as great a torment to the torn joints as further stretching.____Catching up a vessel of wine that stood near by, Conan placed the rim to the wretch's lips. Zorathus gulped spasmodically, the liquid slopping over on his heaving breast.____Into the bloodshot eyes came a gleam of recognition, and the froth-smearred lips parted. From them issued a racking whimper in the Kothic tongue.____'Is this death, then? Is the long agony ended? For this is King Conan who died at Valkia, and I am among the dead.'____'You're not dead,' said Conan. 'But you're dying. You'll be tortured no more. I'll see to that. But I can't help you further. Yet before you die, tell me how to open your iron box!'____'My iron box,' mumbled Zorathus in delirious disjointed phrases. 'The chest forged in unholy fires among the flaming mountains of Khrosha; the metal no chisel can cut. How many treasures has it borne, across the width and the breadth of the world! But no such treasure as it now holds.'____'Tell me how to open it,' urged Conan. 'It can do you no good, and it may aid me.'____'Aye, you are Conan,' muttered the Kothian. 'I have seen you sitting on your throne in the great public hall of Tarantia, with your crown on your head and the scepter in your hand. But you are dead; you died at Valkia. And so I know my own end is at hand.'____'What does the dog say?' demanded Valbroso impatiently, not understanding Kothic. 'Will he tell us how to open the box?'____As if the voice roused a spark of life in the twisted breast Zorathus rolled his bloodshot eyes toward the speaker.____'Only Valbroso will I tell,' he gasped in Zingaran. 'Death is upon me. Lean close to me, Valbroso!'____The count did so, his dark face lit with avarice; behind him his saturnine captain, Beloso, crowded closer.____'Press the seven skulls on the rim, one after another,' gasped Zorathus. 'Press then the head of the dragon that writhes across the lid. Then press the sphere in the dragon's claws. That will release the secret catch.'____'Quick, the box!' cried Valbroso with an oath.____Conan lifted it and set it on a dais, and Valbroso shouldered him aside.____'Let me open it!' cried Beloso, starting forward.____Valbroso cursed him back, his greed blazing in his black eyes.____'None but me shall open it!' he cried.____Conan, whose hand had instinctively gone to his hilt, glanced at Zorathus. The man's eyes were glazed and bloodshot, but they were fixed on Valbroso with burning intensity; and was there the shadow of a grim twisted smile on the dying man's lips? Not until the merchant knew he was dying

had he given up the secret. Conan turned to watch Valbroso, even as the dying man watched him.____Along the rim of the lid seven skulls were carved among intertwining branches of strange trees. An inlaid dragon writhed its way across the top of the lid amid ornate arabesques. Valbroso pressed the skulls in fumbling haste, and as he jammed his thumb down on the carved head of the dragon he swore sharply and snatched his hand away, shaking it in irritation.____'A sharp point on the carvings,' he snarled. 'I've pricked my thumb.'____He pressed the gold ball clutched in the dragon's talons, and the lid flew abruptly open. Their eyes were dazzled by a golden flame. It seemed to their dazed minds that the carved box was full of glowing fire that spilled over the rim and dripped through the air in quivering flakes. Beloso cried out and Valbroso sucked in his breath. Conan stood speechless, his brain snared by the blaze.____'Mitra, what a jewel!' Valbroso's hand dived into the chest, came out with a great pulsing crimson sphere that filled the room with a lambent glow. In its glare Valbroso looked like a corpse. And the dying man on the loosened rack laughed wildly and suddenly.____'Fool!' he screamed. 'The jewel is yours! I give you death with it! The scratch on your thumb - look at the dragon's head, Valbroso!'____They all wheeled, stared. Something tiny and dully gleaming stood up from the gaping, carved mouth.____'The dragon's fang!' shrieked Zorathus. 'Steeped in the venom of the black Stygian scorpion! Fool, fool to open the box of Zorathus with your naked hand! Death! You are a dead man now!'____And with bloody foam on his lips he died. Valbroso staggered, crying out. 'Ah, Mitra, I burn!' he shrieked. 'My veins race with liquid fire! My joints are bursting asunder! Death! Death!' And he reeled and crashed headlong. There was an instant of awful convulsions, in which the limbs were twisted into hideous and unnatural positions, and then in that posture the man froze, his glassy eyes staring sightlessly upward, his lips drawn back from blackened gums.____'Dead!' muttered Conan, stooping to pick up the jewel where it rolled on the floor from Valbroso's rigid hand. It lay on the floor like a quivering pool of sunset fire.____'Dead!' muttered Beloso, with madness in his eyes. And then he moved.____Conan was caught off guard, his eyes dazzled, his brain dazed by the blaze of the great gem. He did not realize Beloso's intention until something crashed with terrible force upon his helmet. The glow of the jewel was splashed with redder flame, and he went to his knees under the blow.____He heard a rush of feet, a bellow of ox-like agony. He was stunned but not wholly senseless, and realized that Beloso had caught up the iron box and crashed it down on his head as he stooped. Only his basinet had saved his skull. He staggered up, drawing his sword, trying to shake the dimness out of his eyes. The room swam to his dizzy gaze. But the door was open and fleet footsteps were dwindling down the winding stair. On the floor the brutish torturer was gasping out his life with a great gash under his breast. And the Heart of Ahriman was gone.____Conan reeled out of the chamber, sword in hand, blood streaming down his face from under his burganet. He ran drunkenly down the steps, hearing a clang of steel in the courtyard below, shouts, then the frantic drum of hoofs. Rushing into the bailey he saw the men-at-arms milling about confusedly, while women screeched. The postern gate stood open and a soldier lay across his pike with his head split. Horses, still bridled and saddled, ran neighing about the court, Conan's black stallion among them.____'He's mad!' howled a woman, wringing her hands as she rushed brainlessly about. 'He came out of the castle like a mad dog, hewing right and left! Beloso's mad! Where's Lord Valbroso?'____'Which way did he go?' roared Conan.____All turned and stared at the stranger's blood-

stained face and naked sword.____'Through the postern!' shrilled a woman, pointing eastward, and another bawled: 'Who is this rogue?'____'Beloso has killed Valbroso!' yelled Conan, leaping and seizing the stallion's mane, as the men-at-arms advanced uncertainly on him. A wild outcry burst forth at his news, but their reaction was exactly as he had anticipated. Instead of closing the gates to take him prisoner, or pursuing the fleeing slayer to avenge their lord, they were thrown into even greater confusion by his words. Wolves bound together only by fear of Valbroso, they owed no allegiance to the castle or to each other.____Swords began to clash in the courtyard, and women screamed. And in the midst of it all, none noticed Conan as he shot through the postern gate and thundered down the hill. The wide plain spread before him, and beyond the hill the caravan road divided: one branch ran south, the other east. And on the eastern road he saw another rider, bending low and spurring hard. The plain swam to Conan's gaze, the sunlight was a thick red haze and he reeled in his saddle, grasping the flowing mane with his hand. Blood rained on his mail, but grimly he urged the stallion on. ____Behind him smoke began to pour out of the castle on the hill where the count's body lay forgotten and unheeded beside that of his prisoner. The sun was setting; against a lurid red sky the two black figures fled.____The stallion was not fresh, but neither was the horse ridden by Beloso. But the great beast responded mightily, calling on deep reservoirs of reserve vitality. Why the Zingaran fled from one pursuer Conan did not tax his bruised brain to guess. Perhaps unreasoning panic rode Beloso, born of the madness that lurked in that blazing jewel. The sun was gone; the white road was a dim glimmer through a ghostly twilight fading into purple gloom far ahead of him.____The stallion panted, laboring hard. The country was changing, in the gathering dusk. Bare plains gave way to clumps of oaks and alders. Low hills mounted up in the distance. Stars began to blink out. The stallion gasped and reeled in his course. But ahead rose a dense wood that stretched to the hills on the horizon, and between it and himself Conan glimpsed the dim form of the fugitive. He urged on the distressed stallion, for he saw that he was overtaking his prey, yard by yard. Above the pound of the hoofs a strange cry rose from the shadows, but neither pursuer nor pursued gave heed.____As they swept in under the branches that overhung the road, they were almost side by side. A fierce cry rose from Conan's lips as his sword went up; a pale oval of a face was turned toward him, a sword gleamed in a half-seen hand, and Beloso echoed the cry - and then the weary stallion, with a lurch and a groan, missed his footing in the shadows and went heels over head, hurling his dazed rider from the saddle. Conan's throbbing head crashed against a stone, and the stars were blotted out in a thicker night.____How long Conan lay senseless he never knew. His first sensation of returning consciousness was that of being dragged by one arm over rough and stony ground and through dense underbrush. Then he was thrown carelessly down, and perhaps the jolt brought back his senses.____His helmet was gone, his head ached abominably, he felt a qualm of nausea, and blood was clotted thickly among his black locks. But with the vitality of a wild thing life and consciousness surged back into him, and he became aware of his surroundings.____A broad red moon was shining through the trees, by which he knew that it was long after midnight. He had lain senseless for hours, long enough to have recovered from that terrible blow Beloso had dealt him, as well as the fall which had rendered him senseless. His brain felt clearer than it had felt during that mad ride after the fugitive.____He was not lying beside the white road, he noticed with a start of surprise, as his

surroundings began to record themselves on his perceptions. The road was nowhere in sight. He lay on the grassy earth, in a small glade hemmed in by a black wall of tree stems and tangled branches. His face and hands were scratched and lacerated as if he had been dragged through brambles. Shifting his body he looked about him. And then he started violently - something was squatting over him ...__At first Conan doubted his consciousness, thought it was but a figment of delirium. Surely it could not be real, that strange, motionless gray being that squatted on its haunches and stared down at him with unblinking soulless eyes.__Conan lay and stared, half expecting it to vanish like a figure of a dream, and then a chill of recollection crept along his spine. Half-forgotten memories surged back, of grisly tales whispered of the shapes that haunted these uninhabited forests at the foot of the hills that mark the Zingaran-Argossean border. Ghouls, men called them, eaters of human flesh, spawn of darkness, children of unholy matings of a lost and forgotten race with the demons of the underworld. Somewhere in these primitive forests were the ruins of an ancient, accursed city, men whispered, and among its tombs slunk gray, anthropomorphic shadows -Conan shuddered strongly.__He lay staring at the malformed head that rose dimly above him, and cautiously he extended a hand toward the sword at his hip. With a horrible cry that the man involuntarily echoed, the monster was at his throat.__Conan threw up his right arm, and the dog-like jaws closed on it, driving the mail links into the hard flesh. The misshapen yet man-like hands clutched for his throat, but he evaded them with a heave and roll of his whole body, at the same time drawing his dagger with his left hand.__They tumbled over and over on the grass, smiting and tearing. The muscles coiling under that gray corpse-like skin were stringy and hard as steel wires, exceeding the strength of a man. But Conan's thews were iron too, and his mail saved him from the gnashing fangs and ripping claws long enough for him to drive home his dagger, again and again and again. The horrible vitality of the semi-human monstrosity seemed inexhaustible, and the king's skin crawled at the feel of that slick, clammy flesh. He put all his loathing and savage revulsion behind the plunging blade, and suddenly the monster heaved up convulsively beneath him as the point found its grisly heart, and then lay still.__Conan rose, shaken with nausea. He stood in the center of the glade uncertainly, sword in one hand and dagger in the other. He had not lost his instinctive sense of direction, as far as the points of the compass were concerned, but he did not know in which direction the road lay. He had no way of knowing in which direction the ghoul had dragged him. Conan glared at the silent, black, moon-dappled woods which ringed him, and felt cold moisture bead his flesh. He was without a horse and lost in these haunted woods, and that staring deformed thing at his feet was a mute evidence of the horrors that lurked in the forest. He stood almost holding his breath in his painful intensity, straining his ears for some crack of twig or rustle of grass.__When a sound did come he started violently. Suddenly out on the night air broke the scream of a terrified horse. His stallion! There were panthers in the wood - or - ghouls ate beasts as well as men.__He broke savagely through the brush in the direction of the sound, whistling shrilly as he ran, his fear drowned in berserk rage. If his horse was killed, there went his last chance of following Beloso and recovering the jewel. Again the stallion screamed with fear and fury, somewhere nearer. There was a sound of lashing heels, and something that was struck heavily and gave way.__Conan burst out into the wide white road without warning, and saw the stallion plunging and rearing

in the moonlight, his ears laid back, his eyes and teeth flashing wickedly. He lashed out with his heels at a slinking shadow that ducked and bobbed about him - and then about Conan other shadows moved: gray, furtive shadows that closed in on all sides. A hideous charnel-house scent reeked up in the night air.____With a curse the king hewed right and left with his broadsword, thrust and ripped with his dagger. Dripping fangs flashed in the moonlight, foul paws caught at him, but he hacked his way through to the stallion, caught the rein, leaped into the saddle. His sword rose and fell, a frosty arc in the moon, showering blood as it split misshapen heads, clove shambling bodies. The stallion reared, biting and kicking. They burst through and thundered down the road. On either hand, for a short space, flitted gray abhorrent shadows. Then these fell behind, and Conan, topping a wooded crest, saw a vast expanse of bare slopes sweeping up and away before him._____13 'A Ghost Out of the Past'____Soon after sunrise Conan crossed the Argossean border. Of Beloso he had seen no trace. Either the captain had made good his escape while the king lay senseless, or had fallen prey to the grim man-eaters of the Zingaran forest. But Conan had seen no signs to indicate the latter possibility. The fact that he had lain unmolested for so long seemed to indicate that the monsters had been engrossed in futile pursuit of the captain. And if the man lived, Conan felt certain that he was riding along the road somewhere ahead of him. Unless he had intended going into Argos he would never have taken the eastward road in the first place.____The helmeted guards at the frontier did not question the Cimmerian. A single wandering mercenary required no passport nor safe-conduct, especially when his unadorned mail showed him to be in the service of no lord. Through the low, grassy hills where streams murmured and oak groves dappled the sward with lights and shadows he rode, following the long road that rose and fell away ahead of him over dales and rises in the blue distance. It was an old, old road, this highway from Poitain to the sea.____Argos was at peace; laden ox-wains rumbled along the road, and men with bare, brown, brawny arms toiled in orchards and fields that smiled away under the branches of the roadside trees. Old men on settles before inns under spreading oak branches called greetings to the wayfarer.____From the men that worked the fields, from the garrulous old men in the inns where he slaked his thirst with great leathern jacks of foaming ale, from the sharp-eyed silk-clad merchants he met upon the road, Conan sought for news of Beloso.____Stories were conflicting, but this much Conan learned: that a lean, wiry Zingaran with the dangerous black eyes and mustaches of the western folk was somewhere on the road ahead of him, and apparently making for Messantia. It was a logical destination; all the sea-ports of Argos were cosmopolitan, in strong contrast with the inland provinces, and Messantia was the most polyglot of all. Craft of all the maritime nations rode in its harbor, and refugees and fugitives from many lands gathered there. Laws were lax; for Messantia thrived on the trade of the sea, and her citizens found it profitable to be somewhat blind on their dealings with seamen. It was not only legitimate trade that flowed into Messantia; smugglers and buccaneers played their part. All this Conan knew well, for had he not, in the days of old when he was a Barachan pirate, sailed by night into the harbor of Messantia to discharge strange cargoes? Most of the pirates of the Barachan Isles - small islands off the southwestern coast of Zingara - were Argossean sailors, and as long as they confined their attentions to the shipping of other nations, the authorities of Argos were not too strict in their interpretation of sea-laws.____But Conan had not limited his activities

to those of the Barachans. He had also sailed with the Zingaran buccaneers, and even with those wild black corsairs that swept up from the far south to harry the northern coasts, and this put him beyond the pale of any law. If he were recognized in any of the ports of Argos it would cost him his head. But without hesitation he rode on to Messantia, halting day or night only to rest the stallion and to snatch a few winks of sleep for himself.____He entered the city unquestioned, merging himself with the throngs that poured continually in and out of this great commercial center. No walls surrounded Messantia. The sea and the ships of the sea guarded the great southern trading city.____It was evening when Conan rode leisurely through the streets that marched down to the waterfront. At the ends of these streets he saw the wharves and the masts and sails of ships. He smelled salt water for the first time in years, heard the thrum of cordage and the creak of spars in the breeze that was kicking up whitecaps out beyond the headlands. Again the urge of far wandering tugged at his heart.____But he did not go on to the wharves. He reined aside and rode up a steep flight of wide, worn stone steps, to a broad street where ornate white mansions overlooked the waterfront and the harbor below. Here dwelt the men who had grown rich from the hard-won fat of the seas - a few old sea-captains who had found treasure afar, many traders and merchants who never trod the naked decks nor knew the roar of tempest or sea-fight.____Conan turned in his horse at a certain gold-worked gate, and rode into a court where a fountain tinkled and pigeons fluttered from marble coping to marble flagging. A page in jagged silken jupon and hose came forward inquiringly. The merchants of Messantia dealt with many strange and rough characters but most of these smacked of the sea. It was strange that a mercenary trooper should so freely ride into the court of a lord of commerce.____'The merchant Publico dwells here?' It was more statement than question, and something in the timbre of the voice caused the page to doff his feather chaperon as he bowed and replied: 'Aye, so he does, my captain.'____Conan dismounted and the page called a servitor, who came running to receive the stallion's rein.____'Your master is within?' Conan drew off his gauntlets and slapped the dust of the road from cloak and mail.____'Aye, my captain. Whom shall I announce?' 'I'll announce myself,' grunted Conan. 'I know the way well enough. Bide you here.'____And obeying that peremptory command the page stood still, staring after Conan as the latter climbed a short flight of marble steps, and wondering what connection his master might have with this giant fighting-man who had the aspect of a northern barbarian.____Menials at their tasks halted and gaped open-mouthed as Conan crossed a wide, cool balcony overlooking the court and entered a broad corridor through which the sea-breeze swept. Halfway down this he heard a quill scratching, and turned into a broad room whose many wide casements overlooked the harbor.____Publico sat at a carved teakwood desk writing on rich parchment with a golden quill. He was a short man, with a massive head and quick dark eyes. His blue robe was of the finest watered silk, trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and from his thick white throat hung a heavy gold chain.____As the Cimmerian entered, the merchant looked up with a gesture of annoyance. He froze in the midst of his gesture. His mouth opened; he stared as at a ghost out of the past. Unbelief and fear glimmered in his wide eyes.____'Well,' said Conan, 'have you no word of greeting, Publico?' Publico moistened his lips.____'Conan!' he whispered incredulously. 'Mitra! Conan! Amra!' 'Who else?' The Cimmerian unclasped his cloak and threw it with his gauntlets down upon the desk. 'How man?' he exclaimed irritably. 'Can't you at least offer me a beaker of wine? My

throat's caked with the dust of the highway.'___'Aye, wine!' echoed Publio mechanically. Instinctively his hand reached for a gong, then recoiled as from a hot coal, and he shuddered.___While Conan watched him with a flicker of grim amusement in his eyes, the merchant rose and hurriedly shut the door, first craning his neck up and down the corridor to be sure that no slave was loitering about. Then, returning, he took a gold vessel of wine from a near-by table and was about to fill a slender goblet when Conan impatiently took the vessel from him and lifting it with both hands, drank deep and with gusto.___'Aye, it's Conan, right enough,' muttered Publio. 'Man, are you mad?'___'By Crom, Publio,' said Conan, lowering the vessel but retaining it in his hands, 'you dwell in different quarters than of old. It takes an Argossean merchant to wring wealth out of a little waterfront shop that stank of rotten fish and cheap wine.'___'The old days are past,' muttered Publio, drawing his robe about him with a slight involuntary shudder. 'I have put off the past like a worn-out cloak.'___'Well,' retorted Conan, 'you can't put me off like an old cloak. It isn't much I want of you, but that much I do want. And you can't refuse me. We had too many dealings in the old days. Am I such a fool that I'm not aware that this fine mansion was built on my sweat and blood? How many cargoes from my galleys passed through your shop?'___'All merchants of Messantia have dealt with the sea-rovers at one time or another,' mumbled Publio nervously.___'But not with the black corsairs,' answered Conan grimly.___Tor Mitra's sake, be silent!' ejaculated Publio, sweat starting out on his brow. His fingers jerked at the gilt-worked edge of his robe.___'Well, I only wished to recall it to your mind,' answered Conan. 'Don't be so fearful. You took plenty of risks in the past, when you were struggling for life and wealth in that lousy little shop down by the wharves, and were hand-and-glove with every buccaneer and smuggler and pirate from here to the Barachan Isles. Prosperity must have softened you.'___'I am respectable,' began Publio.___'Meaning you're rich as hell,' snorted Conan. 'Why? Why did you grow wealthy so much quicker than your competitors? Was it because you did a big business in ivory and ostrich feathers, copper and skins and pearls and hammered gold ornaments, and other things from the coast of Kush? And where did you get them so cheaply, while other merchants were paying their weight in silver to the Stygians for them? I'll tell you, in case you've forgotten: you bought them from me, at considerably less than their value, and I took them from the tribes of the Black Coast, and from the ships of the Stygians - I, and the black corsairs.'___'In Mitra's name, cease!' begged Publio. 'I have not forgotten. But what are you doing here? I am the only man in Argos who knew that the king of Aquilonia was once Conan the buccaneer, in the old days. But word has come southward of the overthrow of Aquilonia and the death of the king.'___'My enemies have killed me a hundred times by rumors,' grunted Conan, 'Yet here I sit and guzzle wine of Kyros.' And he suited the action to the word.___Lowering the vessel, which was now nearly empty, he said: 'It's but a small thing I ask of you, Publio. I know that you're aware of everything that goes on in Messantia. I want to know if a Zingaran named Beloso, or he might call himself anything, is in this city. He's tall and lean and dark like all his race, and it's likely he'll seek to sell a very rare jewel.' Publio shook his head.___'I have not heard of such a man. But thousands come and go in Messantia. If he is here my agents will discover him.'___'Good. Send them to look for him. And in the meantime have my horse cared for, and have food served me here in this room.'___Publio assented volubly, and Conan emptied the wine vessel, tossed it carelessly into a corner, and strode to a near-

by casement, involuntarily expanding his chest as he breathed deep of the salt air. He was looking down upon the meandering waterfront streets. He swept the ships in the harbor with an appreciative glance, then lifted his head and stared beyond the bay, far into the blue haze of the distance where sea met sky. And his memory sped beyond that horizon, to the golden seas of the south, under flaming suns, where laws were not and life ran hotly. Some vagrant scent of spice or palm woke clear-etched images of strange coasts where mangroves grew and drums thundered, of ships locked in battle and decks running blood, of smoke and flame and the crying of slaughter ... Lost in his thoughts he scarcely noticed when Publio stole from the chamber. ___Gathering up his robe, the merchant hurried along the corridors until he came to a certain chamber where a tall, gaunt man with a scar upon his temple wrote continually upon parchment. There was something about this man which made his clerkly occupation seem incongruous. To him Publio spoke abruptly: ___'Conan has returned!' ___'Conan?' The gaunt man started up and the quill fell from his fingers. 'The corsair?' ___'Aye!' ___The gaunt man went livid. 'Is he mad? If he is discovered here we are ruined! They will hang a man who shelters or trades with a corsair as quickly as they'll hang the corsair himself! What if the governor should learn of our past connections with him?' ___'He will not learn,' answered Publio grimly. 'Send your men into the markets and wharfside dives and learn if one Beloso, a Zingaran, is in Messantia. Conan said he had a gem, which he will probably seek to dispose of. The jewel merchants should know of him, if any do. And here is another task for you: pick up a dozen or so desperate villains who can be trusted to do away with a man and hold their tongues afterward. You understand me?' ___'I understand.' The other nodded slowly and somberly. ___'I have not stolen, cheated, lied and fought my way up from the gutter to be undone now by a ghost out of my past,' muttered Publio, and the sinister darkness of his countenance at that moment would have surprised the wealthy nobles and ladies who bought their silks and pearls from his many stalls. But when he returned to Conan a short time later, bearing in his own hands a platter of fruit and meats, he presented a placid face to his unwelcome guest. ___Conan still stood at the casement, staring down into the harbor at the purple and crimson and vermilion and scarlet sails of galleons and caracks and galleys and dromonds. ___'There's a Stygian galley, if I'm not blind,' he remarked, pointing to a long, low, slim black ship lying apart from the others, anchored off the low broad sandy beach that curved round to the distant headland. 'Is there peace, then, between Stygia and Argos?' ___'The same sort that has existed before,' answered Public, setting the platter on the table with a sigh of relief, for it was heavily laden; he knew his guest of old. 'Stygian ports are temporarily open to our ships, as ours to theirs. But may no craft of mine meet their cursed galleys out of sight of land! That galley crept into the bay last night. What its masters wish I do not know. So far they have neither bought nor sold. I distrust those dark-skinned devils. Treachery had its birth in that dusky land.' ___'I've made them howl,' said Conan carelessly, turning from the window. 'In my galley manned by black corsairs I crept to the very bastions of the sea-washed castles of black-walled Khemi by night, and burned the galleons anchored there. And speaking of treachery, mine host, suppose you taste these viands and sip a bit of this wine, just to show me that your heart is on the right side.' ___Publio complied so readily that Conan's suspicions were lulled, and without further hesitation he sat down and devoured enough for three men. ___And while he ate, men moved through the markets and along the waterfront,

searching for a Zingaran who had a jewel to sell or who sought for a ship to carry him to foreign ports. And a tall gaunt man with a scar on his temple sat with his elbows on a wine-stained table in a squalid cellar with a brass lantern hanging from a smoke-blackened beam overhead, and held converse with ten desperate rogues whose sinister countenances and ragged garments proclaimed their profession. ___ And as the first stars blinked out, they shone on a strange band spurring their mounts along the white road that led to Messantia from the west. They were four men, tall, gaunt, clad in black, hooded robes, and they did not speak. They forced their steeds mercilessly onward, and those steeds were gaunt as themselves, and sweat-stained and weary as if from long travel and far wandering. _____14 The Black Hand of Set _____ Conan woke from a sound sleep as quickly and instantly as a cat. And like a cat he was on his feet with his sword out before the man who had touched him could so much as draw back. ___ 'What word, Publio?' demanded Conan, recognizing his host. The gold lamp burned low, casting a mellow glow over the thick tapestries and the rich coverings of the couch whereon he had been reposing. ___ Publio, recovering from the start given him by the sudden action of his awakening guest, replied: 'The Zingaran has been located. He arrived yesterday, at dawn. Only a few hours ago he sought to sell a huge, strange jewel to a Shemitish merchant, but the Shemite would have naught to do with it. Men say he turned pale beneath his black beard at the sight of it, and closing his stall, fled as from a thing accursed.' ___ 'It must be Beloso,' muttered Conan, feeling the pulse in his temples pounding with impatient eagerness. 'Where is he now?' ___ 'He sleeps in the house of Servio.' ___ 'I know that dive of old,' grunted Conan. 'I'd better hasten before some of these waterfront thieves cut his throat for the jewel.' ___ He took up his cloak and flung it over his shoulders, then donned a helmet Publio had procured for him. ___ 'Have my steed saddled and ready in the court,' said he. 'I may return in haste. I shall not forget this night's work, Publio.' ___ A few moments later Publio, standing at a small outer door, watched the king's tall figure receding down the shadowy street. ___ 'Farewell to you, corsair,' muttered the merchant. 'This must be a notable jewel, to be sought by a man who has just lost a kingdom. I wish I had told my knaves to let him secure it before they did their work. But then, something might have gone awry. Let Argos forget Amra, and let my dealings with him be lost in the dust of the past. In the alley behind the house of Servio -that is where Conan will cease to be a peril to me.' ___ * ___ Servio's house, a dingy, ill-famed den, was located close to the wharves, facing the waterfront. It was a shambling building of stone and heavy ship-beams, and a long narrow alley wandered up alongside it. Conan made his way along the alley, and as he approached the house he had an uneasy feeling that he was being spied upon. He stared hard into the shadows of the squalid buildings, but saw nothing, though once he caught the faint rasp of cloth or leather against flesh. But that was nothing unusual. Thieves and beggars prowled these alleys all night, and they were not likely to attack him, after one look at his size and harness. ___ But suddenly a door opened in the wall ahead of him, and he slipped into the shadow of an arch. A figure emerged from the open door and moved along the alley, not furtively, but with a natural noiselessness, like that of a jungle beast. Enough starlight filtered into the alley to silhouette the man's profile dimly as he passed the doorway where Conan lurked. The stranger was a Stygian. There was no mistaking that hawk-faced, shaven head, even in the starlight, nor the mantle over the broad shoulders. He passed on down the alley in the

direction of the beach, and once Conan thought he must be carrying a lantern among his garments, for he caught a flash of lambent light, just as the man vanished. ___But the Cimmerian forgot the stranger as he noticed that the door through which he had emerged still stood open. Conan had intended entering by the main entrance and forcing Servio to show him the room where the Zingaran slept. But if he could get into the house without attracting anyone's attention, so much the better. ___A few long strides brought him to the door, and as his hand fell on the lock he stifled an involuntary grunt. His practised fingers, skilled among the thieves of Zamora long ago, told him that the lock had been forced, apparently by some terrific pressure from the outside that had twisted and bent the heavy iron bolts, tearing the very sockets loose from the jambs. How such damage could have been wrought so violently without awakening everyone in the neighborhood Conan could not imagine, but he felt sure that it had been done that night. A broken lock, if discovered, would not go unmended in the house of Servio, in this neighborhood of thieves and cutthroats. ___Conan entered stealthily, poniard in hand, wondering how he was to find the chamber of the Zingaran. Groping in total darkness he halted suddenly. He sensed death in that room, as a wild beast senses it - not as peril threatening him, but a dead thing, something freshly slain. In the darkness his foot hit and recoiled from something heavy and yielding. With a sudden premonition he groped along the wall until he found the shelf that supported the brass lamp, with its flint, steel and tinder beside it. A few seconds later a flickering, uncertain light sprang up, and he stared narrowly about him. ___A bunk built against the rough stone wall, a bare table and a bench completed the furnishings of the squalid chamber. An inner door stood closed and bolted. And on the hard-beaten dirt floor lay Beloso. On his back he lay, with his head drawn back between his shoulders so that he seemed to stare with his wide glassy eyes at the sooty beams of the cobwebbed ceiling. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a frozen grin of agony. His sword lay near him, still in its scabbard. His shirt was torn open, and on his brown, muscular breast was the print of a black hand, thumb and four fingers plainly distinct. ___Conan glared in silence, feeling the short hairs bristle at the back of his neck. ___'Crom!' he muttered. 'The black hand of Set!' ___He had seen that mark of old, the death-mark of the black priests of Set, the grim cult that ruled in dark Stygia. And suddenly he remembered that curious flash he had seen emanating from the mysterious Stygian who had emerged from this chamber. ___'The Heart, by Crom!' he muttered. 'He was carrying it under his mantle. He stole it. He burst that door by his magic, and slew Beloso. He was a priest of Set.' ___A quick investigation confirmed at least part of his suspicions. The jewel was not on the Zingaran's body. An uneasy feeling rose in Conan that this had not happened by chance, or without design; a conviction that the mysterious Stygian galley had come into the harbor of Messantia on a definite mission. How could the priests of Set know that the Heart had come southward? Yet the thought was no more fantastic than the necromancy that could slay an armed man by the touch of an open, empty hand. ___A stealthy footfall outside the door brought him round like a great cat. With one motion he extinguished the lamp and drew his sword. His ears told him that men were out there in the darkness, were closing in on the doorway. As his eyes became accustomed to the sudden darkness, he could make out dim figures ringing the entrance. He could not guess their identity, but as always he took the initiative - leaping suddenly forth from the doorway without awaiting the attack. ___His unexpected movement took the skulkers by surprise. He

sensed and heard men close about him, saw a dim masked figure in the starlight before him; then his sword crunched home, and he was fleeing away down the alley before the slower-thinking and slower-acting attackers could intercept him. ___As he ran he heard, somewhere ahead of him, a faint creak of oar-locks, and he forgot the men behind him. A boat was moving out into the bay! Gritting his teeth he increased his speed, but before he reached the beach he heard the rasp and creak of ropes, and the grind of the great sweep in its socket. ___Thick clouds, rolling up from the sea, obscured the stars. In thick darkness Conan came upon the strand, straining his eyes out across the black restless water. Something was moving out there - a long, low, black shape that receded in the darkness, gathering momentum as it went. To his ears came the rhythmical clack of long oars. He ground his teeth in helpless fury. It was the Stygian galley and she was racing out to sea, bearing with her the jewel that meant to him the throne of Aquilonia. ___With a savage curse he took a step toward the waves that lapped against the sands, catching at his hauberk and intending to rip it off and swim after the vanishing ship. Then the crunch of a heel in the sand brought him about. He had forgotten his pursuers. ___Dark figures closed in on him with a rush of feet through the sands. The first went down beneath the Cimmerian's flailing sword, but the others did not falter. Blades whickered dimly about him in the darkness or rasped on his mail. Blood and entrails spilled over his hand and someone screamed as he ripped murderously upward. A muttered voice spurred on the attack, and that voice sounded vaguely familiar. Conan plowed through the clinging, hacking shapes toward the voice. A faint light gleaming momentarily through the drifting clouds showed him a tall gaunt man with a great livid scar on his temple. Conan's sword sheared through his skull as through a ripe melon. ___Then an ax, swung blindly in the dark, crashed on the king's basinet, filling his eyes with sparks of fire. He lurched and lunged, felt his sword sink deep and heard a shriek of agony. Then he stumbled over a corpse, and a bludgeon knocked the dented helmet from his head; the next instant the club fell full on his unprotected skull. ___The king of Aquilonia crumpled into the wet sands. Over him wolfish figures panted in the gloom. ___'Strike off his head,' muttered one. ___'Let him lie,' grunted another. 'Help me tie up my wounds before I bleed to death. The tide will wash him into the bay. See, he fell at the water's edge. His skull's split; no man could live after such blows.' ___'Help me strip him,' urged another. 'His harness will fetch a few pieces of silver. And haste. Tiberio is dead, and I hear seamen singing as they reel along the strand. Let us be gone.' ___There followed hurried activity in the darkness, and then the sound of quickly receding footsteps. The tipsy singing of the seamen grew louder. ___In his chamber Publio, nervously pacing back and forth before a window that overlooked the shadowed bay, whirled suddenly, his nerves tingling. To the best of his knowledge the door had been bolted from within; but now it stood open and four men filed into the chamber. At the sight of them his flesh crawled. Many strange beings Publio had seen in his lifetime, but none before like these. They were tall and gaunt, black-robed, and their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadows of their coifs. He could not tell much about their features and was unreason-ingly glad that he could not. Each bore a long, curiously mottled staff. ___'Who are you?' he demanded, and his voice sounded brittle and hollow. 'What do you wish here?' ___'Where is Conan, he who was king of Aquilonia?' demanded the tallest of the four in a passionless monotone that made Publio shudder. It was like the hollow tone of a Khitan temple bell. ___'I do not know what you mean,'

stammered the merchant, his customary poise shaken by the uncanny aspect of his visitors. 'I know no such man.'___'He has been here,' returned the other with no change of inflection. 'His horse is in the courtyard. Tell us where he is before we do you an injury.'___'Gebal!' shouted Publio frantically, recoiling until he crouched against the wall. 'Gebal!'___The four Khitans watched him without emotion or change of expression.___'If you summon your slave he will die,' warned one of them, which only served to terrify Publio more than ever.___'Gebal!' he screamed. 'Where are you, curse you? Thieves are murdering your master!'___Swift footsteps padded in the corridor outside, and Gebal burst into the chamber - a Shemite, of medium height and mightily muscled build, his curled blue-black beard bristling, and a short leaf-shaped sword in his hand.___He stared in stupid amazement at the four invaders, unable to understand their presence; dimly remembering that he had drowsed unexplainably on the stair he was guarding and up which they must have come. He had never slept on duty before. But his master was shrieking with a note of hysteria in his voice, and the Shemite drove like a bull at the strangers, his thickly muscled arm drawing back for the disemboweling thrust. But the stroke was never dealt.___A black-sleeved arm shot out, extending the long staff. Its end but touched the Shemite's brawny breast and was instantly withdrawn. The stroke was horribly like the dart and recovery of a serpent's head.___Gebal halted short in his headlong plunge, as if he had encountered a solid barrier. His bull head toppled forward on his breast, the sword slipped from his fingers, and then he melted slowly to the floor. It was as if all the bones of his frame had suddenly become flabby. Publio turned sick.___'Do not shout again,' advised the tallest Khitan. 'Your servants sleep soundly, but if you awaken them they will die, and you with them. Where is Conan?'___'He is gone to the house of Servio, near the waterfront, to search for the Zingaran Beloso,' gasped Publio, all his power of resistance gone out of him. The merchant did not lack courage; but these uncanny visitants turned his marrow to water. He started convulsively at a sudden noise of footsteps hurrying up the stair outside, loud in the ominous stillness.___'Your servant?' asked the Khitan.___Publio shook his head mutely, his tongue frozen to his palate. He could not speak.___One of the Khitans caught up a silken cover from a couch and threw it over the corpse. Then they melted behind the tapestry, but before the tallest man disappeared, he murmured: 'Talk to this man who comes, and send him away quickly. If you betray us, neither he nor you will live to reach that door. Make no sign to show him you are not alone.' And lifting his staff suggestively, the yellow man faded behind the hangings.___Publio shuddered and choked down a desire to retch. It might have been a trick of the light, but it seemed to him that occasionally those staffs moved slightly of their own accord, as if possessed of an unspeakable life of their own.___He pulled himself together with a mighty effort, and presented a composed aspect to the ragged ruffian who burst into the chamber.___'We have done as you wished, my lord,' this man exclaimed. The barbarian lies dead on the sands at the water's edge.'___Publio felt a movement in the arras behind him, and almost burst from fright. The man swept heedlessly on.___'Your secretary, Tiberio, is dead. The barbarian slew him, and four of my companions. We bore their bodies to the rendezvous. There was nothing of value on the barbarian except a few silver coins. Are there any further orders?'___'None!' gasped Publio, white about the lips. 'Go!'___The desperado bowed and hurried out, with a vague feeling that Publio was both a man of weak stomach and few words.___The four Khitans came from behind the arras.___'Of

whom did this man speak?' the taller demanded. ___'Of a wandering stranger who did me an injury,' panted Publio. ___'You lie,' said the Khitan calmly. 'He spoke of the king of Aquilonia. I read it in your expression. Sit upon that divan and do not move or speak. I will remain with you while my three companions go search for the body.' ___So Publio sat and shook with terror of the silent, inscrutable figure which watched him, until the three Khitans filed back into the room, with the news that Conan's body did not lie upon the sands. Publio did not know whether to be glad or sorry. ___'We found the spot where the fight was fought,' they said. 'Blood was on the sand. But the king was gone.' ___The fourth Khitan drew imaginary symbols upon the carpet with his staff, which glistened scallily in the lamplight. ___'Did you read naught from the sands?' he asked. ___'Aye,' they answered. 'The king lives, and he has gone southward in a ship.' ___The tall Khitan lifted his head and gazed at Publio, so that the merchant broke into a profuse sweat. ___'What do you wish of me?' he stuttered. ___'A ship,' answered the Khitan. 'A ship well manned for a very long voyage.' ___'For how long a voyage?' stammered Publio, never thinking of refusing. ___'To the ends of the world, perhaps,' answered the Khitan, 'or to the molten seas of hell that lie beyond the sunrise.' _____15

The Return of the Corsair _____ Conan's first sensation of returning consciousness was that of motion; under him was no solidity, but a ceaseless heaving and plunging. Then he heard wind humming through cords and spars, and knew he was aboard a ship even before his blurred sight cleared. He heard a mutter of voices and then a dash of water deluged him, jerking him sharply into full animation. He heaved up with a sulphurous curse, braced his legs and glared about him, with a burst of coarse guffaws in his ears and the reek of unwashed bodies in his nostrils. ___He was standing on the poopdeck of a long galley which was running before the wind that whipped down from the north, her striped sail belying against the taut sheets. The sun was just rising, in a dazzling blaze of gold and blue and green. To the left of the shoreline was a dim purple shadow. To the right stretched the open ocean. This much Conan saw at a glance that likewise included the ship itself. ___It was long and narrow, a typical trading-ship of the southern coasts, high of poop and stern, with cabins at either extremity. Conan looked down into the open waist, whence wafted that sickening abominable odor. He knew it of old. It was the body-scent of the oarsmen, chained to their benches. They were all negroes, forty men to each side, each confined by a chain locked about his waist, with the other end welded to a heavy ring set deep in the solid runway beam that ran between the benches from stem to stern. The life of a slave aboard an Argossean galley was a hell unfathomable. Most of these were Kushites, but some thirty of the blacks who now rested on their idle oars and stared up at the stranger with dull curiosity were from the far southern isles, the homelands of the corsairs. Conan recognized them by their straighter features and hair, their rangier, cleaner-limbed build. And he saw among them men who had followed him of old. ___But all this he saw and recognized in one swift, all-embracing glance as he rose, before he turned his attention to the figures about him. Reeling momentarily on braced legs, his fists clenched wrathfully, he glared at the figures clustered about him. The sailor who had drenched him stood grinning, the empty bucket still poised in his hand, and Conan cursed him with venom, instinctively reaching for his hilt. Then he discovered that he was weaponless and naked except for his short leather breeks. ___'What lousy tub is this?' he roared. 'How did I come aboard here?' ___The sailors laughed jeeringly - stocky, bearded Argosseans to a man - and one,

whose richer dress and air of command proclaimed him captain, folded his arms and said domineeringly: 'We found you lying on the sands. Somebody had rapped you on the pate and taken your clothes. Needing an extra man, we brought you aboard.'___'What ship is this?' Conan demanded.___'The Venturer, out of Messantia, with a cargo of mirrors, scarlet silk cloaks, shields, gilded helmets and swords to trade to the Shemites for copper and gold ore. I am Demetrio, captain of this vessel and your master henceforward.'___'Then I'm headed in the direction I wanted to go, after all,' muttered Conan, heedless of that last remark. They were racing southeastward, following the long curve of the Argossean coast. These trading-ships never ventured far from the shoreline. Somewhere ahead of him he knew that low dark Stygian galley was speeding southward.___'Have you sighted a Stygian galley?' began Conan, but the beard of the burly, brutal-faced captain bristled. He was not in the least interested in any question his prisoner might wish to ask, and felt it high time he reduced this independent wastrel to his proper place.___'Get for'ard!' he roared. 'I've wasted time enough with you! I've done you the honor of having you brought to the poop to be revived, and answered enough of your infernal questions. Get off this poop! You'll work your way aboard this galley?'___'I'll buy your ship?' began Conan, before he remembered that he was a penniless wanderer.___A roar of rough mirth greeted these words, and the captain turned purple, thinking he sensed ridicule.___'You mutinous swine!' he bellowed, taking a threatening step forward, while his hand closed on the knife at his belt. 'Get for'ard before I have you flogged! You'll keep a civil tongue in your jaws, or by Mitra, I'll have you chained among the blacks to tug an oar!'___Conan's volcanic temper, never long at best, burst into explosion. Not in years, even before he was king, had a man spoken to him thus and lived.___'Don't lift your voice to me, you tar-breeched dog!' he roared in a voice as gusty as the sea-wind, while the sailors gaped dumfounded. 'Draw that toy and I'll feed you to the fishes!'___'Who do you think you are?' gasped the captain.___'I'll show you!' roared the maddened Cimmerian, and he wheeled and bounded toward the rail, where weapons hung in their brackets.___The captain drew his knife and ran at him bellowing, but before he could strike, Conan gripped his wrist with a wrench that tore the arm clean out of the socket. The captain bellowed like an ox in agony, and then rolled clear across the deck as he was hurled contemptuously from his attacker. Conan ripped a heavy ax from the rail and wheeled cat-like to meet the rush of the sailors. They ran in, giving tongue like hounds, clumsy-footed and awkward in comparison to the pantherish Cimmerian. Before they could reach him with their knives he sprang among them, striking right and left too quickly for the eye to follow, and blood and brains spattered as two corpses struck the deck.___Knives flailed the air wildly as Conan broke through the stumbling, gasping mob and bounded to the narrow bridge that spanned the waist from poop to forecastle, just out of reach of the slaves below. Behind him the handful of sailors on the poop were floundering after him, daunted by the destruction of their fellows, and the rest of the crew - some thirty in all - came running across the bridge toward him, with weapons in their hands.___Conan bounded out on the bridge and stood poised above the upturned black faces, ax lifted, black mane blown in the wind.___'Who am I?' he yelled. 'Look, you dogs! Look, Ajonga, Yasunga, Laranga! Who am I?'___And from the waist rose a shout that swelled to a mighty roar: 'Amra! It is Amra! The Lion has returned!'___The sailors who caught and understood the burden of that awesome shout paled and shrank back, staring in sudden fear at the wild figure on the bridge.

Was this in truth that bloodthirsty ogre of the southern seas who had so mysteriously vanished years ago, but who still lived in gory legends? The blacks were frothing crazy now, shaking and tearing at their chains and shrieking the name of Amra like an invocation. Kushites who had never seen Conan before took up the yell. The slaves in the pen under the after-cabin began to batter at the walls, shrieking like the damned. ___Demetrio, hitching himself along the deck on one hand and his knees, livid with the agony of his dislocated arm, screamed: 'In and kill him, dogs, before the slaves break loose!' ___Fired to desperation by that word, the most dread to all galley-men, the sailors charged on to the bridge from both ends. But with a lion-like bound Conan left the bridge and hit like a cat on his feet on the runway between the benches. ___'Death to the masters!' he thundered, and his ax rose and fell crashingly full on a shackle-chain, severing it like matchwood. In an instant a shrieking slave was free, splintering his oar for a bludgeon. Men were racing frantically along the bridge above, and all hell and bedlam broke loose on the Venturer. Conan's ax rose and fell without pause, and with every stroke a frothing, screaming black giant broke free, mad with hate and the fury of freedom and vengeance. ___Sailors leaping down into the waist to grapple or smite at the naked white giant hewing like one possessed at the shackles, found themselves dragged down by the hands of slaves yet unfreed, while others, their broken chains whipping and snapping about their limbs, came up out of the waist like a blind, black torrent, screaming like fiends, smiting with broken oars and pieces of iron, tearing and rending with talons and teeth. In the midst of the melee the slaves in the pen broke down the walls and came surging up on the decks, and with fifty blacks freed of their benches Conan abandoned his iron-hewing and bounded up on the bridge to add his notched ax to the bludgeons of his partisans. ___Then it was massacre. The Argosseans were strong, sturdy, fearless like all their race, trained in the brutal school of the sea. But they could not stand against these maddened giants, led by the tigerish barbarian. Blows and abuse and hellish suffering were avenged in one red gust of fury that raged like a typhoon from one end of the ship to the other, and when it had blown itself out, but one white man lived aboard the Venturer, and that was the blood-stained giant about whom the chanting blacks thronged to cast themselves prostrate on the bloody deck and beat their heads against the boards in an ecstasy of hero-worship. ___Conan, his mighty chest heaving and glistening with sweat, the red ax gripped in his blood-smeared hand, glared about him as the first chief of men might have glared in some primordial dawn, and shook back his black mane. In that moment he was not king of Aquilonia; he was again lord of the black corsairs, who had hacked his way to lordship through flame and blood. ___'Amra! Amra!' chanted the delirious blacks, those who were left to chant. 'The Lion has returned! Now will the Stygians howl like dogs in the night, and the black dogs of Kush will howl! Now will villages burst in flames and ships founder! Aie, there will be wailing of women and the thunder of the spears!' ___'Cease this yammering, dogs!' Conan roared in a voice that drowned the clap of the sail in the wind. 'Ten of you go below and free the oarsmen who are yet chained. The rest of you man the sweeps and bend to oars and halyards. Crom's devils, don't you see we've drifted inshore during the fight? Do you want to run aground and be retaken by the Argosseans? Throw these carcasses overboard. Jump to it, you rogues, or I'll notch your hides for you!' ___With shouts and laughter and wild singing they leaped to do his commands. The corpses, white and black, were hurled overboard,

where triangular fins were already cutting the water.____Conan stood on the poop, frowning down at the black men who watched him expectantly. His heavy brown arms were folded, his black hair, grown long in his wanderings, blew in the wind. A wilder and more barbaric figure never trod the bridge a ship, and in this ferocious corsair few of the courtiers of Aquilonia would have recognized their king.____'There's food in the hold!' he roared. 'Weapons in plenty for you, for this ship carried blades and harness to the Shemites who dwell along the coast. There are enough of us to work ship, aye, and to fight! You rowed in chains for the Argossean dogs: will you row as free men for Amra?'____'Aye? they roared. 'We are thy children! Lead us where you will!'____'Then fall to and clean out that waist,' he commanded. 'Free men don't labor in such filth. Three of you come with me and break out food from the after-cabin. By Crom, I'll pad out your ribs before this cruise is done.'____Another yell of approbation answered him, as the half-starved blacks scurried to do his bidding. The sail bellied as the wind swept over the waves with renewed force, and the white crests danced along the sweep of the wind. Conan planted his feet to the heave of the deck, breathed deep and spread his mighty arms. King of Aquilonia he might no longer be; king of the blue ocean he was still._____16 Black-Walled Khemi_____The Venturer swept southward like a living thing, her oars pulled now by free and willing hands. She had been transformed from a peaceful trader into a war-galley, insofar as the transformation was possible. Men sat at the benches now with swords at their sides and gilded helmets on their kinky heads. Shields were hung along the rails, and sheafs of spears, bows and arrows adorned the mast. Even the elements seemed to work for Conan now; the broad purple sail bellied to a stiff breeze that held day by day, needing little aid from the oars.____But though Conan kept a man on the masthead day and night, they did not sight a long, low, black galley fleeing southward ahead of them. Day by day the blue waters rolled empty to their view, broken only by fishing-craft which fled like frightened birds before them, at sight of the shields hung along the rail. The season for trading was practically over for the year, and they sighted no other ships.____When the lookout did sight a sail, it was to the north, not the south. Far on the skyline behind them appeared a racing-galley, with full spread of purple sail. The blacks urged Conan to turn and plunder it, but he shook his head. Somewhere south of him a slim black galley was racing toward the ports of Stygia. That night, before darkness shut down, the lookout's last glimpse showed him the racing-galley on the horizon, and at dawn it was still hanging on their tail, afar off, tiny in the distance. Conan wondered if it was following him, though he could think of no logical reason for such a supposition. But he paid little heed.____Each day that carried him farther southward filled him with fiercer impatience. Doubts never assailed him. As he believed in the rise and set of the sun he believed that a priest of Set had stolen the Heart of Ahriman. And where would a priest of Set carry it but to Stygia? The blacks sensed his eagerness, and toiled as they had never toiled under the lash, though ignorant of his goal. They anticipated a red career of pillage and plunder and were content. The men of the southern isles knew no other trade; and the Kushites of the crew joined wholeheartedly in the prospect of looting their own people, with the callousness of their race. Blood-ties meant little; a victorious chieftain and personal gain everything.____Soon the character of the coastline changed. No longer they sailed past steep cliffs with blue hills marching behind them. Now the shore was the edge of broad

meadowlands which barely rose above the water's edge and swept away and away into the hazy distance. Here were few harbors and fewer ports, but the green plain was dotted with the cities of the Shemites; green sea, lapping the rim of the green plains, and the ziggurats of the cities gleaming whitely in the sun, some small in the distance.____Through the grazing-lands moved the herds of cattle, and squat, broad riders with cylindrical helmets and curled blue-black beards, with bows in their hands. This was the shore of the lands of Shem, where there was no law save as each city-state could enforce its own. Far to the eastward, Conan knew, the meadowlands gave way to desert, where there were no cities and the nomadic tribes roamed unhindered.____Still as they plied southward, past the changeless panorama of city-dotted meadowland, at last the scenery again began to alter. Clumps of tamarind appeared, the palm groves grew denser. The shoreline became more broken, a marching rampart of green fronds and trees, and behind them rose bare, sandy hills. Streams poured into the sea, and along their moist banks vegetation grew thick and of vast variety.____So at last they passed the mouth of a broad river that mingled its flow with the ocean, and saw the great black walls and towers of Khemi rise against the southern horizon.____The river was the Styx, the real border of Stygia. Khemi was Stygia's greatest port, and at that time her most important city. The king dwelt at more ancient Luxur, but in Khemi reigned the priestcraft; though men said the center of their dark religion lay far inland, in a mysterious, deserted city near the bank of the Styx. This river, springing from some nameless source far in the unknown lands south of Stygia, ran northward for a thousand miles before it turned and flowed westward for some hundreds of miles, to empty at last into the ocean.____The Venturer, showing no lights, stole past the port in the night, and before dawn discovered her, anchored in a small bay a few miles south of the city. It was surrounded by marsh, a green tangle of mangroves, palms and lianas, swarming with crocodiles and serpents. Discovery was extremely unlikely. Conan knew the place of old; he had hidden there before, in his corsair days.____As they slid silently past the city whose great black bastions rose on the jutting prongs of land which locked the harbor, torches gleamed and smoldered luridly, and to their ears came the low thunder of drums. The port was not crowded with ships, as were the harbors of Argos. The Stygians did not base their glory and power upon ships and fleets. Trading-vessels and war-galleys, indeed, they had, but not in proportion to their inland strength. Many of their craft plied up and down the great river, rather than along the sea-coasts.____The Stygians were an ancient race, a dark, inscrutable people, powerful and merciless. Long ago their rule had stretched far north of the Styx, beyond the meadowlands of Shem, and into the fertile uplands now inhabited by the peoples of Koth and Ophir and Argos. Their borders had marched with those of ancient Acheron. But Acheron had fallen, and the barbaric ancestors of the Hyborians had swept southward in wolfskins and horned helmets, driving the ancient rulers of the land before them. The Stygians had not forgotten.____All day the Venturer lay at anchor in the tiny bay, walled in with green branches and tangled vines through which flitted gay-plumed, harsh-voiced birds, and among which glided bright-scaled, silent reptiles. Toward sundown a small boat crept out and down along the shore, seeking and finding that which Conan desired - a Stygian fisherman in his shallow, flat-prowed boat.____They brought him to the deck of the Venturer - a tall, dark, rangily built man, ashy with fear of his captors, who were ogres of that coast. He was naked except for his silken breeks, for, like the Hyrkanians, even the commoners and slaves of Stygia wore silk; and in

his boat was a wide mantle such as these fishermen flung about their shoulders against the chill of the night. ___He fell to his knees before Conan, expecting torture and death. ___'Stand on your legs, man, and quit trembling,' said the Cimmerian impatiently, who found it difficult to understand abject terror. 'You won't be harmed. Tell me but this: has a galley, a black racing-galley returning from Argos, put into Khemi within the last few days?' ___'Aye, my lord,' answered the fisherman. 'Only yesterday at dawn the priest Thutothmes returned from a voyage far to the north. Men say he has been to Messantia.' ___'What did he bring from Messantia?' ___'Alas, my lord, I know not.' ___'Why did he go to Messantia?' demanded Conan. ___'Nay, my lord, I am but a common man. Who am I to know the minds of the priests of Set? I can only speak what I have seen and what I have heard men whisper along the wharves. Men say that news of great import came southward, though of what none knows; and it is well known that the lord Thutothmes put off in his black galley in great haste. Now he is returned, but what he did in Argos, or what cargo he brought back, none knows, not even the seamen who manned his galley. Men say that he has opposed Thoth-Amon, who is the master of all priests of Set, and dwells in Luxur, and that Thutothmes seeks hidden power to overthrow the Great One. But who am I to say? When priests war with one another a common man can but lie on his belly and hope neither treads upon him.' ___Conan snarled in nervous exasperation at this servile philosophy, and turned to his men. 'I'm going alone into Khemi to find this thief Thutothmes. Keep this man prisoner, but see that you do him no hurt. Crom's devils, stop your yowling! Do you think we can sail into the harbor and take the city by storm? I must go alone.' ___Silencing the clamor of protests, he doffed his own garments and donned the prisoner's silk breeches and sandals, and the band from the man's hair, but scorned the short fisherman's knife. The common men of Stygia were not allowed to wear swords, and the mantle was not voluminous enough to hide the Cimmerian's long blade, but Conan buckled to his hip a Ghan-ata knife, a weapon borne by the fierce desert men who dwelt to the south of the Stygians, a broad, heavy, slightly curved blade of fine steel, edged like a razor and long enough to dismember a man. ___Then, leaving the Stygian guarded by die corsairs, Conan climbed into the fisher's boat. ___'Wait for me until dawn,' he said. 'If I haven't come then, I'll never come, so hasten southward to your own homes.' ___As he clambered over the rail, they set up a doleful wail at his going, until he thrust his head back into sight to curse them into silence. Then, dropping into the boat, he grasped the oars and sent the tiny craft shooting over the waves more swiftly than its owner had ever propelled it. _____17 'He Has Slain the Sacred Son of Set!' _____The harbor of Khemi lay between two great jutting points of land that ran into the ocean. He rounded the southern point, where the great black castles rose like a man-made hill, and entered the harbor just at dusk, when there was still enough light for the watchers to recognize the fisherman's boat and mantle, but not enough to permit recognition of betraying details. Unchallenged he threaded his way among the great black war galleys lying silent and unlighted at anchor, and drew up to a flight of wide stone steps which mounted up from the water's edge. There he made his boat fast to an iron ring set in the stone, as numerous similar craft were tied. There was nothing strange in a fisherman leaving his boat there. None but a fisherman could find a use for such a craft, and they did not steal from one another. ___No one cast him more than a casual glance as he mounted the long steps, unobtrusively avoiding the torches that flared at intervals above the lapping black water. He seemed but an ordinary,

empty-handed fisherman, returning after a fruitless day along the coast. If one had observed him closely, it might have seemed that his step was somewhat too springy and sure, his carriage somewhat too erect and confident for a lowly fisherman. But he passed quickly, keeping in the shadows, and the commoners of Stygia were no more given to analysis than were the commoners of the less exotic races.____In build he was not unlike the warrior casts of the Stygians, who were a tall, muscular race. Bronzed by the sun, he was nearly as dark as many of them. His black hair, square-cut and confined by a copper band, increased the resemblance. The characteristics which set him apart from them were the subtle difference in his walk, and his alien features and blue eyes.____But the mantle was a good disguise, and he kept as much in the shadows as possible, turning away his head when a native passed him too closely.____But it was a desperate game, and he knew he could not long keep up the deception. Khemi was not like the seaports of the Hyborians, where types of every race swarmed. The only aliens here were negro and Shemite slaves; and he resembled neither even as much as he resembled the Stygians themselves. Strangers were not welcome in the cities of Stygia; tolerated only when they came as ambassadors or licensed traders. But even then the latter were not allowed ashore after dark. And now there were no Hyborian ships in the harbor at all. A strange restlessness ran through the city, a stirring of ancient ambitions, a whispering none could define except those who whispered. This Conan felt rather than knew, his whetted primitive instincts sensing unrest about him.____If he were discovered his fate would be ghastly. They would slay him merely for being a stranger; if he were recognized as Amra, the corsair chief who had swept their coasts with steel and flame - an involuntary shudder twitched Conan's broad shoulders. Human foes he did not fear, nor any death by steel or fire. But this was a black land of sorcery and nameless horror. Set the Old Serpent, men said, banished long ago from the Hyborian races, yet lurked in the shadows of the cryptic temples, and awful and mysterious were the deeds done in the nighted shrines.____He had drawn away from the waterfront streets with their broad steps leading down to the water, and was entering the long shadowy streets of the main part of the city. There was no such scene as was offered by any Hyborian city - no blaze of lamps and cressets, with gay-clad people laughing and strolling along the pavements, and shops and stalls wide open and displaying their wares.____Here the stalls were closed at dusk. The only lights along the streets were torches, flaring smokily at wide intervals. People walking the streets were comparatively few; they went hurriedly and unspeaking, and their numbers decreased with the lateness of the hour. Conan found the scene gloomy and unreal; the silence of the people, their furtive haste, the great black stone walls that rose on each side of the streets. There was a grim massiveness about Stygian architecture that was overpowering and oppressive.____Few lights showed anywhere except in the upper parts of the buildings. Conan knew that most of the people lay on the flat roofs, among the palms of artificial gardens under the stars. There was a murmur of weird music from somewhere. Occasionally a bronze chariot rumbled along the flags, and there was a brief glimpse of a tall, hawk-faced noble, with a silk cloak wrapped about him, and a gold band with a rearing serpent-head emblem confining his black mane; of the ebon, naked charioteer bracing his knotty legs against the straining of the fierce Stygian horses.____But the people who yet traversed the streets on foot were commoners, slaves, tradesmen, harlots, toilers, and they became fewer as he progressed. He was making toward the temple of Set, where he knew

he would be likely to find the priest he sought. He believed he would know Thutothmes if he saw him, though his one glance had been in the semi-darkness of the Messantian alley. That the man he had seen there had been the priest he was certain. Only occultists high in the mazes of the hideous Black Ring possessed the power of the black hand that dealt death by its touch; and only such a man would dare defy Thoth-Amon, whom the western world knew only as a figure of terror and myth. ___The street broadened, and Conan was aware that he was getting into the part of the city dedicated to the temples. The great structures reared their black bulks against the dim stars, grim, indescribably menacing in the flare of the few torches. And suddenly he heard a low scream from a woman on the other side of the street and somewhat ahead of him - a naked courtesan wearing the tall plumed head-dress of her class. She was shrinking back against the wall, staring across at something he could not yet see. At her cry the few people on the street halted suddenly as if frozen. At the same instant Conan was aware of a sinister slithering ahead of him. Then about the dark corner of the building he was approaching poked a hideous, wedge-shaped head, and after it flowed coil after coil of rippling, darkly glistening trunk. ___The Cimmerian recoiled, remembering tales he had heard - serpents were sacred to Set, god of Stygia, who men said was himself a serpent. Monsters such as this were kept in the temples of Set, and when they hungered, were allowed to crawl forth into the streets to take what prey they wished. Their ghastly feasts were considered a sacrifice to the scaly god. ___The Stygians within Conan's sight fell to their knees, men and women, and passively awaited their fate. One the great serpent would select, would lap in scaly coils, crush to a red pulp and swallow as a rat-snake swallows a mouse. The others would live. That was the will of the gods. ___But it was not Conan's will. The python glided toward him, its attention probably attracted by the fact that he was the only human in sight still standing erect. Gripping his great knife under his mantle, Conan hoped the slimy brute would pass him by. But it halted before him and reared up horrifically in the flickering torchlight, its forked tongue flickering in and out, its cold eyes glittering with the ancient cruelty of the serpent-folk. Its neck arched, but before it could dart, Conan whipped his knife from under his mantle and struck like a flicker of lightning. The broad blade split that wedge-shaped head and sheared deep into the thick neck. ___Conan wrenched his knife free and sprang clear as the great body knotted and looped and whipped terrifically in its death throes. In the moment that he stood staring in morbid fascination, the only sound was the thud and swish of the snake's tail against the stones. ___Then from the shocked votaries burst a terrible cry: 'Blasphemer! He has slain the sacred son of Set! Slay him! Slay! Slay!' ___Stones whizzed about him and the crazed Stygians rushed at him, shrieking hysterically, while from all sides others emerged from their houses and took up the cry. With a curse Conan wheeled and darted into the black mouth of an alley. He heard the patter of bare feet on the flags behind him as he ran more by feel than by sight, and the walls resounded to the vengeful yells of the pursuers. Then his left hand found a break in the wall, and he turned sharply into another, narrower alley. On both sides rose sheer black stone walls. High above him he could see a thin line of stars. These giant walls, he knew, were the walls of temples. He heard, behind him, the pack sweep past the dark mouth in full cry. Their shouts grew distant, faded away. They had missed the smaller alley and run straight on in the blackness. He too kept straight ahead, though the thought of encountering another of

Set's 'sons' in the darkness brought a shudder from him.____Then somewhere ahead of him he caught a moving glow, like that of a crawling glow-worm. He halted, flattened himself against the wall and gripped his knife. He knew what it was: a man approaching with a torch. Now it was so close he could make out the dark hand that gripped it, and the dim oval of a dark face. A few more steps and the man would certainly see him. He sank into a tigerish crouch - the torch halted. A door was briefly etched in the glow, while the torch-bearer fumbled with it. Then it opened, the tall figure vanished through it, and darkness closed again on the alley. There was a sinister suggestion of furtiveness about that slinking figure, entering the alley-door in darkness; a priest, perhaps, returning from some dark errand.____But Conan groped toward the door. If one man came up that alley with a torch, others might come at any time. To retreat the way he had come might mean to run full into the mob from which he was fleeing. At any moment they might return, find the narrower alley and come howling down it. He felt hemmed in by those sheer, unscalable walls, desirous of escape, even if escape meant invading some unknown building.____The heavy bronze door was not locked. It opened under his fingers and he peered through the crack. He was looking into a great square chamber of massive black stone. A torch smoldered in a niche in the wall. The chamber was empty. He glided through the lacquered door and closed it behind him.____His sandaled feet made no sound as he crossed the black marble floor. A teak door stood partly open, and gliding through this, knife in hand, he came out into a great, dim, shadowy place whose lofty ceiling was only a hint of darkness high above him, toward which the black walls swept upward. On all sides black-arched doorways opened into the great still hall. It was lit by curious bronze lamps that gave a dim weird light. On the other side of the great hall a broad black marble stairway, without a railing, marched upward to lose itself in gloom, and above him on all sides dim galleries hung like black stone ledges.____Conan shivered; he was in a temple of some Stygian god, if not Set himself, then someone barely less grim. And the shrine did not lack an occupant. In the midst of the great hall stood a black stone altar, massive, somber, without carvings or ornament, and upon it coiled one of the great sacred serpents, its iridescent scales shimmering in the lamplight. It did not move, and Conan remembered stories that the priests kept these creatures drugged part of the time. The Cimmerian took an uncertain step out from the door, then shrank back suddenly, not into the room he had just quitted, but into a velvet-curtained recess. He had heard a soft step somewhere near by.____From one of the black arches emerged a tall, powerful figure in sandals and silken loin-cloth, with a wide mantle trailing from his shoulders. But face and head were hidden by a monstrous mask, a half-bestial, half-human countenance, from the crest of which floated a mass of ostrich plumes.____In certain ceremonies the Stygian priests went masked. Conan hoped the man would not discover him, but some instinct warned the Stygian. He turned abruptly from his destination, which apparently was the stair, and stepped straight to the recess. As he jerked aside the velvet hanging, a hand darted from the shadows, crushed the cry in his throat and jerked him headlong into the alcove, and the knife impaled him.____Conan's next move was the obvious one suggested by logic. He lifted off the grinning mask and drew it over his own head. The fisherman's mantle he flung over the body of the priest, which he concealed behind the hangings, and drew the priestly mantle about his own brawny shoulders. Fate had given him a disguise. All Khemi might well be searching now for the blasphemer who dared

defend himself against a sacred snake; but who would dream of looking for him under the mask of a priest?___He strode boldly from the alcove and headed for one of the arched doorways at random; but he had not taken a dozen strides when he wheeled again, all his senses edged for peril.____A band of masked figures filed down the stair, appareled exactly as he was. He hesitated, caught in the open, and stood still, trusting to his disguise, though cold sweat gathered on his forehead and the backs of his hands. No word was spoken. Like phantoms they descended into the great hall and moved past him toward a black arch. The leader carried an ebon staff which supported a grinning white skull, and Conan knew it was one of the ritualistic processions so inexplicable to a foreigner, but which played a strong - and often sinister - part in the Stygian religion. The last figure turned his head slightly toward the motionless Cimmerian, as if expecting him to follow. Not to do what was obviously expected of him would rouse instant suspicion. Conan fell in behind the last man and suited his gait to their measured pace.____They traversed a long, dark, vaulted corridor in which, Conan noticed uneasily, the skull on the staff glowed phosphorescently. He felt a surge of unreasoning, wild animal panic that urged him to rip out his knife and slash right and left at these uncanny figures, to flee madly from the grim, dark temple. But he held himself in check, fighting down the dim monstrous intuitions that rose in the back of his mind and peopled the gloom with shadowy shapes of horror; and presently he barely stifled a sigh of relief as they filed through a great double-valved door which was three times higher than a man, and emerged into the starlight.____Conan wondered if he dared fade into some dark alley; but hesitated, uncertain, and down the long dark street they padded silently, while such folk as they met turned their heads away and fled from them. The procession kept far out from the walls; to turn and bolt into any of the alleys they passed would be too conspicuous. While he mentally fumed and cursed, they came to a low-arched gateway in the southern wall, and through this they filed. Ahead of them and about them lay clusters of low, flat-topped mud houses, and palm-groves, shadowy in the starlight. Now if ever, thought Conan, was his time to escape his silent companions.____But the moment the gate was left behind them those companions were no longer silent. They began to mutter excitedly among themselves. The measured, ritualistic gait was abandoned, the staff with its skull was tucked unceremoniously under the leader's arm, and the whole group broke ranks and hurried onward. And Conan hurried with them. For in the low murmur of speech he had caught a word that galvanized him. The word was: 'Thutothmes!'_____18 'I Am the Woman Who Never Died'_____Conan stared with burning interest at his masked companions. One of them was Thutothmes, or else the destination of the band was a rendezvous with the man he sought. And he knew what that destination was, when beyond the palms he glimpsed a black triangular bulk looming against the shadowy sky.____They passed through the belt of huts and groves, and if any man saw them he was careful not to show himself. The huts were dark. Behind them the black towers of Khemi rose gloomily against the stars that were mirrored in the waters of the harbor; ahead of them the desert stretched away in dim darkness; somewhere a jackal yapped. The quick-passing sandals of the silent neophytes made no noise in the sand. They might have been ghosts, moving toward that colossal pyramid that rose out of the murk of the desert. There was no sound over all the sleeping land.____Conan's heart beat quicker as he gazed at the grim black wedge that stood etched against the stars, and his impatience to close with Thutothmes in whatever conflict the meeting

might mean was not unmixed with a fear of the unknown. No man could approach one of those somber piles of black stone without apprehension. The very name was a symbol of repellent horror among the northern nations, and legends hinted that the Stygians did not build them; that they were in the land at whatever immeasurably ancient date the dark-skinned people came into the land of the great river. ___As they approached the pyramid he glimpsed a dim glow near the base which presently resolved itself into a doorway, on either side of which brooded stone lions with the heads of women, cryptic, inscrutable, nightmares crystalized in stone. The leader of the band made straight for the doorway, in the deep well of which Conan saw a shadowy figure. ___The leader paused an instant beside this dim figure, and then vanished into the dark interior, and one by one the others followed. As each masked priest passed through the gloomy portal he was halted briefly by the mysterious guardian and something passed between them, some word or gesture Conan could not make out. Seeing this, the Cimmerian purposely lagged behind, and stooping, pretended to be fumbling with the fastening of his sandal. Not until the last of the masked figures had disappeared did he straighten and approach the portal. ___He was uneasily wondering if the guardian of the temple were human, remembering some tales he had heard. But his doubts were set at rest. A dim bronze cresset glowing just within the door lighted a long narrow corridor that ran away into blackness, and a man standing silent in the mouth of it, wrapped in a wide black cloak. No one else was in sight. Obviously the masked priests had disappeared down the corridor. ___Over the cloak that was drawn about his lower features, the Stygian's piercing eyes regarded Conan sharply. With his left hand he made a curious gesture. On a venture Conan imitated it. But evidently another gesture was expected; the Stygian's right hand came from under his cloak with a gleam of steel and his murderous stab would have pierced the heart of an ordinary man. ___But he was dealing with one whose thews were nerved to the quickness of a jungle cat. Even as the dagger flashed in the dim light, Conan caught the dusky wrist and smashed his clenched right fist against the Stygian's jaw. The man's head went back against the stone wall with a dull crunch that told of a fractured skull. ___Standing for an instant above him, Conan listened intently. The cresset burned low, casting vague shadows about the door. Nothing stirred in the blackness beyond, though far away and below him, as it seemed, he caught the faint, muffled note of a gong. ___He stooped and dragged the body behind the great bronze door which stood wide, opened inward, and then the Cimmerian went warily but swiftly down the corridor, toward what doom he did not even try to guess. ___He had not gone far when he halted, baffled. The corridor split in two branches, and he had no way of knowing which the masked priests had taken. At a venture he chose the left. The floor slanted slightly downward and was worn smooth as by many feet. Here and there a dim cresset cast a faint nightmarish twilight. Conan wondered uneasily for what purpose these colossal piles had been reared, in what forgotten age. This was an ancient, ancient land. No man knew how many ages the black temples of Stygia had looked against the stars. ___Narrow black arches opened occasionally to right and left, but he kept to the main corridor, although a conviction that he had taken the wrong branch was growing in him. Even with their start on him, he should have overtaken the priests by this time. He was growing nervous. The silence was like a tangible thing, and yet he had a feeling that he was not alone. More than once, passing a nighted arch he seemed to feel the glare of unseen eyes fixed upon him. He paused, half minded to turn back to where the corridor had

first branched. He wheeled abruptly, knife lifted, every nerve tingling. ___A girl stood at the mouth of a smaller tunnel, staring fixedly at him. Her ivory skin showed her to be Stygian of some ancient noble family, and like all such women she was tall, lithe, voluptuously figured, her hair a great pile of black foam, among which gleamed a sparkling ruby. But for her velvet sandals and broad jewel-crusted girdle about her supple waist she was quite nude. ___'What do you here?' she demanded. ___To answer would betray his alien origin. He remained motionless, a grim, somber figure in the hideous mask with the plumes floating over him. His alert gaze sought the shadows behind her and found them empty. But there might be hordes of fighting-men within her call. ___She advanced toward him, apparently without apprehension though with suspicion. ___'You are not a priest,' she said. 'You are a fighting-man. Even with that mask that is plain. There is as much difference between you and a priest as there is between a man and a woman. By Set!' she exclaimed, halting suddenly, her eyes flaring wide. 'I do not believe you are even a Stygian!' ___With a movement too quick for the eye to follow, his hand closed about her round throat, lightly as a caress. ___'Not a sound out of you!' he muttered. ___Her smooth ivory flesh was cold as marble, yet there was no fear in the wide, dark, marvelous eyes which regarded him. ___'Do not fear,' she answered calmly. 'I will not betray you. But are you mad to come, a stranger and a foreigner, to the forbidden temple of Set?' ___'I'm looking for the priest Thutothmes,' he answered. 'Is he in this temple?' ___'Why do you seek him?' she parried. ___'He has something of mine which was stolen.' ___'I will lead you to him,' she volunteered so promptly that his suspicions were instantly roused. ___'Don't play with me, girl,' he growled. ___'I do not play with you. I have no love for Thutothmes.' ___He hesitated, then made up his mind; after all, he was as much in her power as she was in his. ___'Walk beside me,' he commanded, shifting his grasp from her throat to her wrist. 'But walk with care. If you make a suspicious move?' ___She led him down the slanting corridor, down and down, until there were no more cressets, and he groped his way in darkness, aware less by sight than by feel and sense of the woman at his side. Once when he spoke to her, she turned her head toward him and he was startled to see her eyes glowing like golden fire in the dark. Dim doubts and vague monstrous suspicions haunted his mind, but he followed her, through a labyrinthine maze of black corridors that confused even his primitive sense of direction. He mentally cursed himself for a fool, allowing himself to be led into that black abode of mystery; but it was too late to turn back now. Again he felt life and movement in the darkness about him, sensed peril and hunger burning impatiently in the blackness. Unless his ears deceived him he caught a faint sliding noise that ceased and receded at a muttered command from the girl. ___She led him at last into a chamber lighted by a curious seven-branched candelabrum in which black candles burned weirdly. He knew they were far below the earth. The chamber was square, with walls and ceiling of polished black marble and furnished after the manner of the ancient Stygians; there was a couch of ebony, covered with black velvet, and on a black stone dais lay a carved mummy-case. ___Conan stood waiting expectantly, staring at the various black arches which opened into the chamber. But the girl made no move to go farther. Stretching herself on the couch with feline suppleness, she intertwined her fingers behind her sleek head and regarded him from under long drooping lashes. ___'Well?' he demanded impatiently. 'What are you doing? Where's Thutothmes?' ___'There is no haste,' she answered lazily. 'What is an hour -or a day, or a year, or a century, for that

matter? Take off your mask. Let me see your features.'___With a grunt of annoyance Conan dragged off the bulky headpiece, and the girl nodded as if in approval as she scanned his dark scarred face and blazing eyes.___'There is strength in you - great strength; you could strangle a bullock.'___He moved restlessly, his suspicion growing. With his hand on his hilt he peered into the gloomy arches.___'If you've brought me into a trap,' he said, 'you won't live to enjoy your handiwork. Are you going to get off that couch and do as you promised, or do I have to?'___His voice trailed away. He was staring at the mummy-case, on which the countenance of the occupant was carved in ivory with the startling vividness of a forgotten art. There was a disquieting familiarity about that carved mask, and with something of a shock he realized what it was; there was a startling resemblance between it and the face of the girl lolling on the ebon couch. She might have been the model from which it was carved, but he knew the portrait was at least centuries old. Archaic hieroglyphics were scrawled across the lacquered lid, and, seeking back into his mind for tag-ends of learning, picked up here and there as incidentals of an adventurous life, he spelled them out, and said aloud: 'Akivasha! '___'You have heard of Princess Akivasha?' inquired the girl on the couch.___'Who hasn't?' he grunted. The name of that ancient, evil, beautiful princess still lived the world over in song and legend, though ten thousand years had rolled their cycles since the daughter of Tuthamon had reveled in purple feasts amid the black halls of ancient Luxur.___'Her only sin was that she loved life and all the meanings of life,' said the Stygian girl. 'To win life she courted death. She could not bear to think of growing old and shriveled and worn, and dying at last as hags die. She wooed Darkness like a lover and his gift was life - life that, not being life as mortals know it, can never grow old and fade. She went into the shadows to cheat age and death?'___Conan glared at her with eyes that were suddenly burning slits. And he wheeled and tore the lid from the sarcophagus. It was empty. Behind him the girl was laughing and the sound froze the blood in his veins. He whirled back to her, the short hairs on his neck bristling.___'You are Akivasha!' he grated.___She laughed and shook back her burnished locks, spread her arms sensuously.___'I am Akivasha! I am the woman who never died, who never grew old! Who fools say was lifted from the earth by the gods, in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, to queen it for ever in some celestial clime! Nay, it is in the shadows that mortals find immortality! Ten thousand years ago I died to live for ever! Give me your lips, strong man!'___Rising lithely she came to him, rose on tiptoe and flung her arms about his massive neck. Scowling down into her upturned, beautiful countenance he was aware of a fearful fascination and an icy fear.___'Love me!' she whispered, her head thrown back, eyes closed and lips parted. 'Give me of your blood to renew my youth and perpetuate my everlasting life! I will make you, too, immortal! I will teach you the wisdom of all the ages, all the secrets that have lasted out the eons in the blackness beneath these dark temples. I will make you king of that shadowy horde which revels among the tombs of the ancients when night veils the desert and bats flit across the moon. I am weary of priests and magicians, and captive girls dragged screaming through the portals of death. I desire a man. Love me, barbarian!'___She pressed her dark head down against his mighty breast, and he felt a sharp pang at the base of his throat. With a curse he tore her away and flung her sprawling across the couch.___'Damned vampire!' Blood was trickling from a tiny wound in his throat.___She reared up on the couch like a serpent poised to strike,

all the golden fires of hell blazing in her wide eyes. Her lips drew back, revealing white pointed teeth. 'Fool!' she shrieked. 'Do you think to escape me? You will live and die in darkness! I have brought you far below the temple. You can never find your way out alone. You can never cut your way through those which guard the tunnels. But for my protection the sons of Set would long ago have taken you into their bellies. Fool, I shall yet drink your blood!' 'Keep away from me or I'll slash you asunder,' he grunted, his flesh crawling with revulsion. 'You may be immortal, but steel will dismember you.' As he backed toward the arch through which he had entered, the light went out suddenly. All the candles were extinguished at once, though he did not know how; for Akivasha had not touched them. But the vampire's laugh rose mockingly behind him, poison-sweet as the viols of hell, and he sweated as he groped in the darkness for the arch in a near-panic. His fingers encountered an opening and he plunged through it. Whether it was the arch through which he had entered he did not know, nor did he very much care. His one thought was to get out of the haunted chamber which had housed that beautiful, hideous, undead fiend for so many centuries. His wanderings through those black, winding tunnels were a sweating nightmare. Behind him and about him he heard faint slitherings and glidings, and once the echo of that sweet, hellish laughter he had heard in the chamber of Akivasha. He slashed ferociously at sounds and movements he heard or imagined he heard in the darkness near him, and once his sword cut through some yielding tenuous substance that might have been cobwebs. He had a desperate feeling that he was being played with, lured deeper and deeper into ultimate night, before being set upon by demoniac talon and fang. And through his fear ran the sickening revulsion of his discovery. The legend of Akivasha was so old, and among the evil tales told of her ran a thread of beauty and idealism, of everlasting youth. To so many dreamers and poets and lovers she was not alone the evil princess of Stygian legend, but the symbol of eternal youth and beauty, shining for ever in some far realm of the gods. And this was the hideous reality. This foul perversion was the truth of that everlasting life. Through his physical revulsion ran the sense of a shattered dream of man's idolatry, its glittering gold proved slime and cosmic filth. A wave of futility swept over him, a dim fear of the falseness of all men's dreams and idolatries. And now he knew that his ears were not playing him tricks. He was being followed, and his pursuers were closing in on him. In the darkness sounded shufflings and slidings that were never made by human feet; no, nor by the feet of any normal animal. The underworld had its bestial life too, perhaps. They were behind him. He turned to face them, though he could see nothing, and slowly backed away. Then the sounds ceased, even before he turned his head and saw, somewhere down the long corridor, a glow of light. _____19 In the Hall of the Dead _____ Conan moved cautiously in the direction of the light he had seen, his ear cocked over his shoulder, but there was no further sound of pursuit, though he felt the darkness pregnant with sentient life. The glow was not stationary; it moved, bobbing grotesquely along. Then he saw the source. The tunnel he was traversing crossed another, wider corridor some distance ahead of him. And along this latter tunnel filed a bizarre procession - four tall, gaunt men in black, hooded robes, leaning on staves. The leader held a torch above his head - a torch that burned with a curious steady glow. Like phantoms they passed across his limited range of vision and vanished, with only a fading glow to tell of their passing. Their appearance was indescribably eldritch. They were not Stygians, not like anything Conan had ever

seen. He doubted if they were even humans. They were like black ghosts, stalking ghoulishly along the haunted tunnels. ___But his position could be no more desperate than it was. Before the inhuman feet behind him could resume their slithering advance at the fading of the distant illumination, Conan was running down the corridor. He plunged into the other tunnel and saw, far down it, small in the distance, the weird procession moving in the glowing sphere. He stole noiselessly after them, then shrank suddenly back against the wall as he saw them halt and cluster together as if conferring on some matter. They turned as if to retrace their steps, and he slipped into the nearest archway. Groping in the darkness to which he had become so accustomed that he could all but see through it, he discovered that the tunnel did not run straight, but meandered, and he fell back beyond the first turn, so that the light of the strangers should not fall on him as they passed. ___But as he stood there, he was aware of a low hum of sound from somewhere behind him, like the murmur of human voices. Moving down the corridor in that direction, he confirmed his first suspicion. Abandoning his original intention of following the ghoulish travelers to whatever destination might be theirs, he set out in the direction of the voices. ___Presently he saw a glint of light ahead of him, and turning into the corridor from which it issued, saw a broad arch filled with a dim glow at the other end. On his left a narrow stone stair went upward, and instinctive caution prompted him to turn and mount the stair. The voices he heard were coming from beyond that flame-filled arch. ___The sounds fell away beneath him as he climbed, and presently he came out through a low arched door into a vast open space glowing with a weird radiance. ___He was standing on a shadowy gallery from which he looked down into a broad dim-lit hall of colossal proportions. It was a hall of the dead, which few ever see but the silent priests of Stygia. Along the black walls rose tier above tier of carven, painted sarcophagi. Each stood in a niche in the dusky stone' and the tiers mounted up and up to be lost in the gloom above! Thousands of carven masks stared impassively down upon the group in the midst of the hall, rendered futile and insignificant by that vast array of the dead. ___Of this group ten were priests, and though they had discarded their masks Conan knew they were the priests he had accompanied to the pyramid. They stood before a tall, hawk-faced man beside a black altar on which lay a mummy in rotting swathings. And the altar seemed to stand in the heart of a living fire which pulsed and shimmered, dripping flakes of quivering golden flame on the black stones about it. This dazzling glow emanated from a great red jewel which lay upon the altar, and in the reflection of which the faces of the priests looked ashy and corpse-like. As he looked, Conan felt the pressure of all the weary leagues and the weary nights and days of his long quest, and he trembled with the mad urge to rush among those silent priests, clear his way with mighty blows of naked steel, and grasp the red gem with passion-taut fingers. But he gripped himself with iron control, and crouched down in the shadow of the stone balustrade. A glance showed him that a stair led down into the hall from the gallery, hugging the wall and half hidden in the shadows. He glared into the dimness of the vast place, seeking other priests or votaries, but saw only the group about the altar. ___In that great emptiness the voice of the man beside the altar sounded hollow and ghostly: ___'. .. And so the word came southward. The night wind whispered it, the ravens croaked of it as they flew, and the grim bats told it to the owls and the serpents that lurk in hoary ruins. Werewolf and vampire knew, and the ebon-bodied demons that prowl by night. The sleeping Night of the World stirred and shook its heavy

mane, and there began a throbbing of drums in deep darkness, and the echoes of far weird cries frightened men who walked by dusk. For the Heart of Ahriman had come again into the world to fulfill its cryptic destiny.____'Ask me not how I, Thutothmes of Khemi and the Night, heard the word before Thoth-Amon who calls himself prince of all wizards. There are secrets not meet for such ears even as yours, and Thoth-Amon is not the only lord of the Black Ring.____'I knew, and I went to meet the Heart which came southward. It was like a magnet which drew me, unerringly. From death to death it came, riding on a river of human blood. Blood feeds it, blood draws it. Its power is greatest when there is blood on the hands that grasp it, when it is wrested by slaughter from its holder. Wherever it gleams, blood is spilt and kingdoms totter, and the forces of nature are put in turmoil.____'And here I stand, the master of the Heart, and have summoned you to come secretly, who are faithful to me, to share in the black kingdom that shall be. Tonight you shall witness the breaking of Thoth-Amon's chains which enslave us, and the birth of empire.____'Who am I, even I, Thutothmes, to know what powers lurk and dream in those crimson deeps? It holds secrets forgotten for three thousand years. But I shall learn. These shall tell me!____'He waved his hand toward the silent shapes that lined the hall.____'See how they sleep, staring through their carven masks! Kings, queens, generals, priests, wizards, the dynasties and the nobility of Stygia for ten thousand years! The touch of the heart will awaken them from their long slumber. Long, long the Heart throbbed and pulsed in ancient Stygia. Here was its home in the centuries before it journeyed to Acheron. The ancients knew its full power, and they will tell me when by its magic I restore them to life to labor for me.____'I will rouse them, will waken them, will learn their forgotten wisdom, the knowledge locked in those withered skulls. By the lore of the dead we shall enslave the living! Aye, kings and generals and wizards of old shall be our helpers and our slaves. Who shall stand before us?____'Look! This dried, shriveled thing on the altar was once Thothmekri, a high priest of Set, who died three thousand years ago. He was an adept of the Black Ring. He knew of the Heart. He will tell us of its powers.'____Lifting the great jewel, the speaker laid it on the withered breast of the mummy, and lifted his hand as he began an incantation. But the incantation was never finished. With his hand lifted and his lips parted he froze, glaring past his acolytes, and they wheeled to stare in the direction in which he was looking.____Through the black arch of a door four gaunt, black-robed shapes had filed into the great hall. Their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadow of their hoods.____'Who are you?' ejaculated Thutothmes in a voice as pregnant with danger as the hiss of a cobra. 'Are you mad, to invade the holy shrine of Set?'____The tallest of the strangers spoke, and his voice was toneless as a Khitan temple bell.____'We follow Conan of Aquilonia.'____'He is not here,' answered Thutothmes, shaking back his mantle from his right hand with a curious menacing gesture, like a panther unsheathing his talons.____'You lie. He is in this temple. We tracked him from a corpse behind the bronze door of the outer portal through a maze of corridors. We were following his devious trail when we became aware of this conclave. We go now to take it up again. But first give us the Heart of Ahriman.'____'Death is the portion of madmen,' murmured Thutothmes, moving nearer the speaker. His priests closed in on cat-like feet, but the strangers did not appear to heed.____'Who can look upon it without desire?' said the Khitan. 'In Khitai we have heard of it. It will give us power over the people which cast us out. Glory and wonder dream in its crimson deeps. Give it to

us, before we slay you.'___A fierce cry rang out as a priest leaped with a flicker of steel. Before he could strike, a scaly staff licked out and touched his breast, and he fell as a dead man falls. In an instant the mummies were staring down on a scene of blood and horror. Curved knives flashed and crimsoned, snaky staffs licked in and out, and whenever they touched a man, that man screamed and died. ___At the first stroke Conan had bounded up and was racing down the stairs. He caught only glimpses of that brief, fiendish fight - saw men swaying, locked in battle and streaming blood; saw one Khitan, fairly hacked to pieces, yet still on his feet and dealing death, when Thutothmes smote him on the breast with his open empty hand, and he dropped dead, though naked steel had not been enough to destroy his uncanny vitality. ___By the time Conan's hurtling feet left the stair, the fight was all but over. Three of the Khitans were down, slashed and cut to ribbons and disemboweled, but of the Stygians only Thutothmes remained on his feet. ___He rushed at the remaining Khitan, his empty hand lifted like a weapon, and that hand was black as that of a negro. But before he could strike, the staff in the tall Khitan's hand licked out, seeming to elongate itself as the yellow man thrust. The point touched the bosom of Thutothmes and he staggered; again and yet again the staff licked out, and Thutothmes reeled and fell dead, his features blotted out in a rush of blackness that made the whole of him the same hue as his enchanted hand. ___The Khitan turned toward the jewel that burned on the breast of the mummy, but Conan was before him. ___In a tense stillness the two faced each other, amid that shambles, with the carved mummies staring down upon them. ___'Far have I followed you, oh king of Aquilonia,' said the Khitan calmly. 'Down the long river, and over the mountains, across Poitain and Zingara and through the hills of Argos and down the coast. Not easily did we pick up your trail from Tarantia, for the priests of Asura are crafty. We lost it in Zingara, but we found your helmet in the forest below the border hills, where you had fought with the ghouls of the forests. Almost we lost the trail again tonight among these labyrinths.' ___Conan reflected that he had been fortunate in returning from the vampire's chamber by another route than that by which he had been led to it. Otherwise he would have run fall into these yellow fiends instead of sighting them from afar as they smelled out his spoor like human bloodhounds, with whatever uncanny gift was theirs. ___The Khitan shook his head slightly, as if reading his mind. 'That is meaningless; the long trail ends here.' 'Why have you hounded me?' demanded Conan, poised to move in any direction with the celerity of a hair-trigger. ___'It was a debt to pay,' answered the Khitan. 'To you who are about to die, I will not withhold knowledge. We were vassals of the king of Aquilonia, Valerius. Long we served him, but of that service we are free now - my brothers by death, and I by the fulfilment of obligation. I shall return to Aquilonia with two hearts; for myself the Heart of Ahriman; for Valerius the heart of Conan. A kiss of the staff that was cut from the living Tree of Death?' ___The staff licked out like the dart of a viper, but the slash of Conan's knife was quicker. The staff fell in writhing halves, there was another flicker of the keen steel like a jet of lightning, and the head of the Khitan rolled to the floor. ___Conan wheeled and extended his hand toward the jewel -then he shrank back, his hair bristling, his blood congealing icily. ___For no longer a withered brown thing lay on the altar. The jewel shimmered on the full, arching breast of a naked, living man who lay among the moldering bandages. Living? Conan could not decide. The eyes were like dark murky glass under which shone inhuman somber fires. ___Slowly the man rose, taking the jewel in his hand. He

towered beside the altar, dusky, naked, with a face like a carved image. Mutely he extended his hand toward Conan, with the jewel throbbing like a living heart within it. Conan took it, with an eerie sensation of receiving gifts from the hand of the dead. He somehow realized that the proper incantations had not been made - the conjurement had not been completed - life had not been fully restored to his corpse.____'Who are you?' demanded the Cimmerian.____The answer came in a toneless monotone, like the dripping of water from stalactites in subterranean caverns. 'I was Thoth-mekri; I am dead.'____'Well, lead me out of this accursed temple, will you?' Conan requested, his flesh crawling.____With measured, mechanical steps the dead man moved toward a black arch. Conan followed him. A glance back showed him once again the vast, shadowy hall with its tiers of sarcophagi, the dead men sprawled about the altar; the head of the Khitan he had slain stared sightless up at the sweeping shadows.____The glow of the jewel illuminated the black tunnels like an ensorcelled lamp, dripping golden fire. Once Conan caught a glimpse of ivory flesh in the shadows, believed he saw the vampire that was Akivasha shrinking back from the glow of the jewel; and with her, other less human shapes scuttled or shambled into the darkness.____The dead man strode straight on, looking neither to right nor left, his pace as changeless as the tramp of doom. Cold sweat gathered thick on Conan's flesh. Icy doubts assailed him. How could he know that this terrible figure out of the past was leading him to freedom? But he knew that, left to himself, he could never untangle this bewitched maze of corridors and tunnels. He followed his awful guide through blackness that loomed before and behind them and was filled with skulking shapes of horror and lunacy that cringed from the blinding glow of the Heart.____Then the bronze doorway was before him, and Conan felt the night wind blowing across the desert, and saw the stars, and the starlit desert across which streamed the great black shadow of the pyramid. Thothmekri pointed silently into the desert, and then turned and stalked soundlessly back in the darkness. Conan stared after that silent figure that receded into the blackness on soundless, inexorable feet as one that moves to a known and inevitable doom, or returns to everlasting sleep.____With a curse the Cimmerian leaped from the doorway and fled into the desert as if pursued by demons. He did not look back toward the pyramid, or toward the black towers of Khemi looming dimly across the sands. He headed southward toward the coast, and he ran as a man runs in ungovernable panic. The violent exertion shook his brain free of black cobwebs; the clean desert wind blew the nightmares from his soul and his revulsion changed to a wild tide of exultation before the desert gave way to a tangle of swampy growth through which he saw the black water lying before him, and the Venturer at anchor.____He plunged through the undergrowth, hip-deep in the marshes; dived headlong into the deep water, heedless of sharks or crocodiles, and swam to the galley and was clambering up the chain on to the deck, dripping and exultant, before the watch saw him.____'Awake, you dogs!' roared Conan, knocking aside the spear the startled lookout thrust at his breast. 'Heave up the anchor!____Lay to the doors! Give that fisherman a helmet full of gold and put him ashore! Dawn will soon be breaking, and before sunrise we must be racing for the nearest port of Zingara!'____He whirled about his head the great jewel, which threw off splashes of light that spotted the deck with golden fire._____20 Out of the Dust Shall Acheron Arise_____Winter had passed from Aquilonia. Leaves sprang out on the limbs of trees, and the fresh grass smiled to the touch of the warm southern breezes. But many a field lay idle and

empty, many a charred heap of ashes marked the spot where proud villas or prosperous towns had stood. Wolves prowled openly along the grass-grown highways, and bands of gaunt, masterless men slunk through the forests. Only in Tarantia was feasting and wealth and pageantry. Valerius ruled like one touched with madness. Even many of the barons who had welcomed his return cried out at last against him. His tax-gatherers crushed rich and poor alike; the wealth of a looted kingdom poured into Tarantia, which became less like the capital of a realm than the garrison of conquerors in a conquered land. Its merchants waxed rich, but it was a precarious prosperity; for none knew when he might be accused of treason on a trumped-up charge, and his property confiscated, himself cast into prison or brought to the bloody block. Valerius made no attempt to conciliate his subjects. He maintained himself by means of the Nemedian soldiery and by desperate mercenaries. He knew himself to be a puppet of Amalric. He knew that he ruled only on the sufferance of the Nemedian. He knew that he could never hope to unite Aquilonia under his rule and cast off the yoke of his masters, for the outland provinces would resist him to the last drop of blood. And for that matter the Nemedians would cast him from his throne if he made any attempt to consolidate his kingdom. He was caught in his own vise. The gall of defeated pride corroded his soul, and he threw himself into a reign of debauchery, as one who lives from day to day, without thought or care for tomorrow. Yet there was subtlety in his madness, so deep that not even Amalric guessed it. Perhaps the wild, chaotic years of wandering as an exile had bred in him a bitterness beyond common conception. Perhaps his loathing of his present position increased this bitterness to a kind of madness. At any event he lived with one desire: to cause the ruin of all who associated with him. He knew that his rule would be over the instant he had served Amalric's purpose; he knew, too, that so long as he continued to oppress his native kingdom the Nemedian would suffer him to reign, for Amalric wished to crush Aquilonia into ultimate submission, to destroy its last shred of independence, and then at last to seize it himself, rebuild it after his own fashion with his vast wealth, and use its men and natural resources to wrest the crown of Nemedias from Tarascus. For the throne of an emperor was Amalric's ultimate ambition, and Valerius knew it. Valerius did not know whether Tarascus suspected this, but he knew that the king of Nemedias approved of his ruthless course. Tarascus hated Aquilonia, with a hate born of old wars. He desired only the destruction of the western kingdom. And Valerius intended to ruin the country so utterly that not even Amalric's wealth could ever rebuild it. He hated the baron quite as much as he hated the Aquilonians, and hoped only to live to see the day when Aquilonia lay in utter ruin, and Tarascus and Amalric were locked in hopeless civil war that would as completely destroy Nemedias. He believed that the conquest of the still defiant provinces of Gunderland and Poitain and the Bossonian marches would mark his end as king. He would then have served Amalric's purpose, and could be discarded. So he delayed the conquest of these provinces, confining his activities to objectless raids and forays, meeting Amalric's urges for action with all sorts of plausible objections and postponements. His life was a series of feasts and wild debauches. He filled his palace with the fairest girls of the kingdom, willing or unwilling. He blasphemed the gods and sprawled drunken on the floor of the banquet hall wearing the golden crown, and staining his royal purple robes with the wine he spilled. In gusts of blood-lust he festooned the gallows in the market square with dangling corpses, glutted the axes of the headsman and sent his Nemedian

horsemen thundering through the land pillaging and burning. Driven to madness, the land was in a constant upheaval of frantic revolt, savagely suppressed. Valerius plundered and raped and looted and destroyed until even Amalric protested, warning him that he would beggar the kingdom beyond repair, not knowing that such was his fixed determination.____But while in both Aquilonia and Nemedica men talked of the madness of the king, in Nemedica men talked much of Xaltotun, the masked one. Yet few saw him on the streets of Belverus. Men said he spent much time in the hills, in curious conclaves with surviving remnants of an old race: dark, silent folk who claimed descent from an ancient kingdom. Men whispered of drums beating far up in the dreaming hills, of fires glowing in the darkness, and strange chantings borne on the winds, chant-ings and rituals forgotten centuries ago except as meaningless formulas mumbled beside mountain hearths in villages whose inhabitants differed strangely from the people of the valleys.____The reason for these conclaves none knew, unless it was Orastes, who frequently accompanied the Pythonian, and on whose countenance a haggard shadow was growing.____But in the full flood of spring a sudden whisper passed over the sinking kingdom that woke the land to eager life. It came like a murmurous wind drifting up from the south, waking men sunk in the apathy of despair. Yet how it first came none could truly say. Some spoke of a strange, grim old woman who came down from the mountains with her hair flowing in the wind, and a great gray wolf following her like a dog. Others whispered of the priests of Asura who stole like furtive phantoms from Gunderland to the marches of Poitain, and to the forest villages of the Bossonians.____However the word came, revolt ran like a flame along the borders. Outlying Nemedian garrisons were stormed and put to the sword, foraging parties were cut to pieces; the west was up in arms, and there was a different air about the rising, a fierce resolution and inspired wrath rather than the frantic despair that had motivated the preceding revolts. It was not only the common people; barons were fortifying their castles and hurling defiance at the governors of the provinces. Bands of Bossonians were seen moving along the edges of the marches: stocky, resolute men in brigandines and steel caps, with longbows in their hands. From the inert stagnation of dissolution and ruin the realm was suddenly alive, vibrant and dangerous. So Amalric sent in haste for Tarascus, who came with an army.____In the royal palace in Tarantia the two kings and Amalric discussed the rising. They had not sent for Xaltotun, immersed in his cryptic studies in the Nemedian hills. Not since that bloody day in the valley of the Valkia had they called upon him for aid of his magic, and he had drawn apart, communing but little with them, apparently indifferent to their intrigues.____Nor had they sent for Orastes, but he came, and he was white as spume blown before the storm. He stood in the gold-domed chamber where the kings held conclave and they beheld in amazement his haggard stare, the fear they had never guessed the mind of Orastes could hold.____'You are weary, Orastes,' said Amalric. 'Sit upon this divan and I will have a slave fetch you wine. You have ridden hard?'____Orastes waved aside the invitation.____'I have killed three horses on the road from Belverus. I cannot drink wine, I cannot rest, until I have said what I have to say.'____He paced back and forth as if some inner fire would not let him stand motionless, and halting before his wondering companions:____'When we employed the Heart of Ahriman to bring a dead man back to life,' Orastes said abruptly, 'we did not weigh the consequences of tampering in the black dust of the past. The fault is mine, and the sin. We thought only of our ambitions, forgetting what ambitions this man might

himself have. And we have loosed a demon upon the earth, a fiend inexplicable to common humanity. I have plumbed deep in evil, but there is a limit to which I, or any man of my race and age, can go. My ancestors were clean men, without any demoniacal taint; it is only I who have sunk into the pits, and I can sin only to the extent of my personal individuality. But behind Xaltotun lie a thousand centuries of black magic and diabolism, an ancient tradition of evil. He is beyond our conception not only because he is a wizard himself, but also because he is the son of a race of wizards.____'I have seen things that have blasted my soul. In the heart of the slumbering hills I have watched Xaltotun commune with the souls of the damned, and invoke the ancient demons of forgotten Acheron. I have seen the accursed descendants of that accursed empire worship him and hail him as their arch-priest. I have seen what he plots - and I tell you it is no less than the restoration of the ancient, black, grisly kingdom of Acheron!'____'What do you mean?' demanded Amalric. 'Acheron is dust. There are not enough survivals to make an empire. Not even Xaltotun can reshape the dust of three thousand years.'____'You know little of his black powers,' answered Orastes grimly. 'I have seen the very hills take on an alien and ancient aspect under the spell of his incantations. I have glimpsed, like shadows behind the realities, the dim shapes and outlines of valleys, forests, mountains and lakes that are not as they are today, but as they were in that dim yesterday - have even sensed, rather than glimpsed, the purple towers of forgotten Python shimmering like figures of mist in the dusk.____'And in the last conclave to which I accompanied him, understanding of his sorcery came to me at last, while the drums beat and the beast-like worshippers howled with their heads in the dust. I tell you he would restore Acheron by his magic, by the sorcery of a gigantic blood-sacrifice such as the world has never seen. He would enslave the world, and with a deluge of blood wash away the present and restore the past!'____'You are mad!' exclaimed Tarascus.____'Mad?' Orastes turned a haggard stare upon him. 'Can any man see what I have seen and remain wholly sane? Yet I speak the truth. He plots the return of Acheron, with its towers and wizards and kings and horrors, as it was in the long ago. The descendants of Acheron will serve him as a nucleus upon which to build, but it is the blood and the bodies of the people of the world today that will furnish the mortar and the stones for the rebuilding. I cannot tell you how. My own brain reels when I try to understand. But I have seen! Acheron will be Acheron again, and even the hills, the forests and the rivers will resume their ancient aspect. Why not? If I, with my tiny store of knowledge, could bring to life a man dead three thousand years, why cannot the greatest wizard of the world bring back to life a kingdom dead three thousand years? Out of the dust shall Acheron arise at his bidding.'____'How can we thwart him?' asked Tarascus, impressed. 'There is but one way,' answered Orastes. 'We must steal the Heart of Ahriman!'____'But I?' began Tarascus involuntarily, then closed his mouth quickly.____None had noticed him, and Orastes was continuing. 'It is a power that can be used against him. With it in my hands I might defy him. But how shall we steal it? He has it hidden in some secret place, from which not even a Zamorian thief might filch it. I cannot learn its hiding-place. If he would only sleep again the sleep of the black lotus - but the last time he slept thus was after the battle of the Valkia, when he was weary because of the great magic he had performed, and?'____The door was locked and bolted, but it swung silently open and Xaltotun stood before them, calm, tranquil, stroking his patriarchal beard; but the lambent lights of hell flickered in his

eyes.____'I have taught you too much,' he said calmly, pointing a finger like an index of doom at Orastes. And before any could move, he had cast a handful of dust on the floor near the feet of the priest, who stood like a man turned to marble. It flamed, smoldered; a blue serpentine of smoke rose and swayed upward about Orastes in a slender spiral. And when it had risen above his shoulders it curled about his neck with a whipping suddenness like the stroke of a snake. Orastes' scream was choked to a gurgle. His hands flew to his neck, his eyes were distended, his tongue protruded. The smoke was like a blue rope about his neck; then it faded and was gone, and Orastes slumped to the floor a dead man.____Xaltotun smote his hands together and two men entered, men often observed accompanying him - small, repulsively dark, with red, oblique eyes and pointed, rat-like teeth. They did not speak. Lifting the corpse, they bore it away.____Dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand, Xaltotun seated himself at the ivory table about which sat the pale kings.____'Why are you in conclave?' he demanded.____'The Aquilonians have risen in the west,' answered Amalric, recovering from the grisly jolt the death of Orastes had given him. 'The fools believe that Conan is alive, and coming at the head of a Poitanian army to reclaim his kingdom. If he had reappeared immediately after Valkia, or if a rumor had been circulated that he lived, the central provinces would not have risen under him, they feared your powers so. But they have become so desperate under Valerius' misrule that they are ready to follow any man who can unite them against us, and prefer sudden death to torture and continual misery.____'Of course the tale has lingered stubbornly in the land that Conan was not really slain at Valkia, but not until recently have the masses accepted it. But Pallantides is back from exile in Ophir, swearing that the king was ill in his tent that day, and that a man-at-arms wore his harness, and a squire who but recently recovered from the stroke of a mace received at Valkia confirms his tale - or pretends to.____'An old woman with a pet wolf has wandered up and down the land, proclaiming that King Conan yet lives, and will return some day to reclaim the crown. And of late the cursed priests of Asura sing the same song. They claim that word has come to them by some mysterious means that Conan is returning to reconquer his domain. I cannot catch either her or them. This is, of course, a trick of Trocero's. My spies tell me there is indisputable evidence that the Poitanians are gathering to invade Aquilonia. I believe that Trocero will bring forward some pretender who he will claim is King Conan.'____Tarascus laughed, but there was no conviction in his laughter. He surreptitiously felt of a scar beneath his jupon, and remembered ravens that cawed on the trail of a fugitive; remembered the body of his squire, Arideus, brought back from the border mountains horribly mangled, by a great gray wolf, his terrified soldiers said. But he also remembered a red jewel stolen from a golden chest while a wizard slept, and he said nothing.____And Valerius remembered a dying nobleman who gasped out a tale of fear, and he remembered four Khitans who disappeared into the mazes of the south and never returned. But he held his tongue, for hatred and suspicion of his allies ate at him like a worm, and he desired nothing so much as to see both rebels and Nemedians go down locked in the death grip.____But Amalric exclaimed: 'It is absurd to dream that Conan lives!'____For answer Xaltotun cast a roll of parchment on the table, Amalric caught it up, glared at it. From his lips burst a furious, incoherent cry. He read:____To Xaltotun, grand fakir of Nemedias: ____Dog of Acheron, I am returning to my kingdom, and I mean to hang your hide on a bramble.____Conan____'A forgery!' exclaimed Amalric. Xaltotun shook his head.____'It is genuine.

I have compared it with the signature on the royal documents on record in the libraries of the court. None could imitate that bold scrawl.'___'Then if Conan lives,' muttered Amalric, 'this uprising will not be like the others, for he is the only man living who can unite the Aquilonians. But,' he protested, 'this is not like Conan. Why should he put us on our guard with his boasting? One would think that he would strike without warning, after the fashion of the barbarians.'___'We are already warned,' pointed out Xaltotun. 'Our spies have told us of preparations for war in Poitain. He could not cross the mountains without our knowledge; so he sends me his defiance in characteristic manner.'___'Why to you?' demanded Valerius. 'Why not to me, or to Tarascus?'___Xaltotun turned his inscrutable gaze upon the king.___'Conan is wiser than you,' he said at last. 'He already knows what you kings have yet to learn - that it is not Tarascus, nor Valerius, no, nor Amalric, but Xaltotun who is the real master of the western nations.'___They did not reply; they sat staring at him, assailed by a numbing realization of the truth of his assertion.___'There is no road for me but the imperial highway,' said Xaltotun. 'But first we must crush Conan. I do not know how he escaped me at Belverus, for knowledge of what happened while I lay in the slumber of the black lotus is denied me. But he is in the south, gathering an army. It is his last, desperate blow, made possible only by the desperation of the people who have suffered under Valerius. Let them rise; I hold them all in the palm of my hand. We will wait until he moves against us, and then we will crush him once and for all.___'Then we shall crush Poitain and Gunderland and the stupid Bossonians. After them Ophir, Argos, Zingara, Koth - all the nations of the world we shall weld into one vast empire. You shall rule as my satraps, and as my captains shall be greater than kings are now. I am unconquerable, for the Heart of Ahriman is hidden where no man can ever wield it against me again.'___Tarascus averted his gaze, lest Xaltotun read his thoughts. He knew the wizard had not looked into the golden chest with its carven serpents that had seemed to sleep, since he laid the Heart therein. Strange as it seemed, Xaltotun did not know that the heart had been stolen; the strange jewel was beyond or outside the ring of his dark wisdom; his uncanny talents did not warn him that the chest was empty. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun knew the full extent of Orastes' revelations, for the Pythonian had not mentioned the restoration of Acheron, but only the building of a new, earthly empire. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun was yet quite sure of his power; if they needed his aid in their ambitions, no less he needed theirs. Magic depended, to a certain extent after all, on sword strokes and lance thrusts. The king read meaning in Amalric's furtive glance; let the wizard use his arts to help them defeat their most dangerous enemy. Time enough then to turn against him. There might yet be a way to cheat this dark power they had raised._____21 Drums of Peril_____Confirmation of the war came when the army of Poitain, ten thousand strong, marched through the southern passes with waving banners and shimmer of steel. And at their head, the spies swore, rode a giant figure in black armor, with the royal lion of Aquilonia worked in gold upon the breast of his rich silken surcoat. Conan lived! The king lived! There was no doubt of it in men's minds now, whether friend or foe.___With the news of the invasion from the south there also came word, brought by hard-riding couriers, that a host of Gunder-men was moving southward, reinforced by the barons of the northwest and the northern Bossonians. Tarascus marched with thirty-one thousand men to Galparan, on the river Shirki, which the Gundermen must cross to strike

at the towns still held by the Nemedians. The Shirki was a swift, turbulent river rushing southwestward through rocky gorges and canyons, and there were few places where an army could cross at that time of the year, when the stream was almost bank-full with the melting of the snows. All the country east of the Shirki was in the hands of the Nemedians, and it was logical to assume that the Gundermen would attempt to cross either at Galparan, or at Tanasul, which lay to the south of Galparan. Reinforcements were daily expected from Nemedias, until word came that the king of Ophir was making hostile demonstrations on Nemedias's southern border, and to spare any more troops would be to expose Nemedias to the risk of an invasion from the south. Amalric and Valerius moved out from Tarantia with twenty-five thousand men, leaving as large a garrison as they dared to discourage revolts in the cities during their absence. They wished to meet and crush Conan before he could be joined by the rebellious forces of the kingdom. The king and his Poitanians had crossed the mountains, but there had been no actual clash of arms, no attack on towns or fortresses. Conan had appeared and disappeared. Apparently he had turned westward through the wild, thinly settled hill country, and entered the Bossonian marches, gathering recruits as he went. Amalric and Valerius with their host, Nemedians, Aquilonian renegades, and ferocious mercenaries, moved through the land in baffled wrath, looking for a foe which did not appear. Amalric found it impossible to obtain more than vague general tidings about Conan's movements. Scouting-parties had a way of riding out and never returning, and it was not uncommon to find a spy crucified to an oak. The countryside was up and striking as peasants and country-folk strike - savagely, murderously and secretly. All that Amalric knew certainly was that a large force of Gundermen and northern Bossonians was somewhere to the north of him, beyond the Shirki, and that Conan with a smaller force of Poitanians and southern Bossonians was somewhere to the southwest of him. He began to grow fearful that if he and Valerius advanced further into the wild country, Conan might elude them entirely, march around them and invade the central provinces behind them. Amalric fell back from the Shirki valley and camped in a plain a day's ride from Tanasul. There he waited. Tarascus maintained his position at Galparan, for he feared that Conan's maneuvers were intended to draw him southward, and so let the Gundermen into the kingdom at the northern crossing. To Amalric's camp came Xaltotun in his chariot drawn by the uncanny horses that never tired, and he entered Amalric's tent where the baron conferred with Valerius over a map spread on an ivory camp table. This map Xaltotun crumpled and flung aside. 'What your scouts cannot learn for you,' quoth he, 'my spies tell me, though their information is strangely blurred and imperfect, as if unseen forces were working against me. Conan is advancing along the Shirki river with ten thousand Poitanians, three thousand southern Bossonians, and barons of the west and south with their retainers to the number of five thousand. An army of thirty thousand Gundermen and northern Bossonians is pushing southward to join him. They have established contact by means of secret communications used by the cursed priests of Asura, who seem to be opposing me, and whom I will feed to a serpent when the battle is over - I swear it by Set! Both armies are headed for the crossing at Tanasul, but I do not believe that the Gundermen will cross the river. I believe that Conan will cross, instead, and join them.' 'Why should Conan cross the river?' 'Because it is to his advantage to delay the battle. The longer he waits, the stronger he will become, the more precarious our position. The hills on the other side of the river swarm

with people passionately loyal to his cause - broken men, refugees, fugitives from Valerius' cruelty. From all over the kingdom men are hurrying to join his army, singly and by companies. Daily, parties from our armies are ambushed and cut to pieces by the country-folk. Revolt grows in the central provinces, and will soon burst into open rebellion. The garrisons we left there are not sufficient, and we can hope for no reinforcements from Nemedra for the time being. I see the hand of Pallantides in this brawling on the Ophirean frontier. He has kin in Ophir. ___'If we do not catch and crush Conan quickly the provinces will be in blaze of revolt behind us. We shall have to fall back to Tarantia to defend what we have taken; and we may have to fight our way through a country in rebellion, with Conan's whole force at our heels, and then stand siege in the city itself, with enemies within as well as without. No, we cannot wait. We must crush Conan before his army grows too great, before the central provinces rise. With his head hanging above the gate at Tarantia you will see how quickly the rebellion will fall apart.' ___'Why do you not put a spell on his army to slay them all?' asked Valerius, half in mockery. ___Xaltotun stared at the Aquilonian as if he read the full extent of the mocking madness that lurked in those wayward eyes. ___'Do not worry,' he said at last. 'My arts shall crush Conan finally like a lizard under the heel. But even sorcery is aided by pikes and swords.' ___'If he crosses the river and takes up his position in the Goralian hills he may be hard to dislodge,' said Amalric. 'But if we catch him in the valley on this side of the river we can wipe him out. How far is Conan from Tanasul?' ___'At the rate he is marching he should reach the crossing sometime tomorrow night. His men are rugged and he is pushing them hard. He should arrive there at least a day before the Gundermen.' ___'Good!' Amalric smote the table with his clenched fist. 'I can reach Tanasul before he can. I'll send a rider to Tarascus, bidding him follow me to Tanasul. By the time he arrives I will have cut Conan off from the crossing and destroyed him. Then our combined force can cross the river and deal with the Gundermen.' ___Xaltotun shook his head impatiently. ___'A good enough plan if you were dealing with anyone but Conan. But your twenty-five thousand men are not enough to destroy his eighteen thousand before the Gundermen come up. They will fight with the desperation of wounded panthers. And suppose the Gundermen come up while the hosts are locked in battle? You will be caught between two fires and destroyed before Tarascus can arrive. He will reach Tanasul too late to aid you.' ___'What then?' demanded Amalric. ___'Move with your whole strength against Conan,' answered the man from Acheron. 'Send a rider bidding Tarascus join us here. We will wait his coming. Then we will march together to Tanasul.' ___'But while we wait,' protested Amalric, 'Conan will cross the river and join the Gundermen.' ___'Conan will not cross the river,' answered Xaltotun. ___Amalric's head jerked up and he stared into the cryptic dark eyes. ___'What do you mean?' ___'Suppose there were torrential rains far to the north, at the head of the Shirki? Suppose the river came down in such flood as to render the crossing at Tanasul impassable? Could we not then bring up our entire force at our leisure, catch Conan on this side of the river and crush him, and then, when the flood subsided, which I think it would do the next day, could we not cross the river and destroy the Gundermen? Thus we could use our full strength against each of these smaller forces in turn.' ___Valerius laughed as he always laughed at the prospect of the ruin of either friend or foe, and drew a restless hand jerkily through his unruly yellow locks. Amalric stared at the man from Acheron with mingled fear

and admiration.____'If we caught Conan in Shirki valley with the hill ridges to his right and the river in flood to his left,' he admitted, 'with our whole force we could annihilate him. Do you think - are you sure - do you believe such rains will fall?'____'I go to my tent,' answered Xaltotun, rising. 'Necromancy is not accomplished by the waving of a wand. Send a rider to Tarascus. And let none approach my tent.'____That last command was unnecessary. No man in that host could have been bribed to approach that mysterious black silken pavilion, the door-flaps of which were always closely drawn. None but Xaltotun ever entered it, yet voices were often heard issuing from it; its walls billowed sometimes without a wind, and weird music came from it. Sometimes, deep in midnight, its silken walls were lit red by flames flickering within, limning misshapen silhouettes that passed to and fro.____Lying in his own tent that night, Amalric heard the steady rumble of a drum in Xaltotun's tent; through the darkness it boomed steadily, and occasionally the Nemedian could have sworn that a deep, croaking voice mingled with the pulse of the drum. And he shuddered, for he knew that voice was not the voice of Xaltotun. The drum rustled and muttered on like deep thunder, heard afar off, and before dawn Amalric glancing from his tent, caught the red flicker of lightning afar on the northern horizon. In all other parts of the sky the great stars blazed whitely. But the distant lightning flickered incessantly, like the crimson glint of firelight on a tiny, turning blade.____At sunset of the next day Tarascus came up with his host, dusty and weary from hard marching, the footmen straggling hours behind the horsemen. They camped in the plain near Amalric's camp, and at dawn the combined army moved westward.____Ahead of him roved a swarm of scouts, and Amalric waited impatiently for them to return and tell of the Poitanians trapped beside a furious flood. But when the scouts met the column it was with the news that Conan had crossed the river!____'What?' exclaimed Amalric. 'Did he cross before the flood?'____'There was no flood,' answered the scouts, puzzled. 'Late last night he came up to Tanasul and flung his army across.'____'No flood?' exclaimed Xaltotun, taken aback for the first time in Amalric's knowledge. 'Impossible! There were mighty rains upon the headwaters of the Shirki last night and the night before that!'____'That may be your lordship,' answered the scout. 'It is true the water was muddy, and the people of Tanasul said that the river rose perhaps a foot yesterday; but that was not enough to prevent Conan's crossing.'____Xaltotun's sorcery had failed! The thought hammered in Amalric's brain. His horror of this strange man out of the past had grown steadily since that night in Belverus when he had seen a brown, shriveled mummy swell and grow into a living man. And the death of Orastes had changed lurking horror into active fear. In his heart was a grisly conviction that the man - or devil - was invincible. Yet now he had undeniable proof of his failure.____Yet even the greatest of necromancers might fail occasionally, thought the baron. At any rate, he dared not oppose the man from Acheron - yet. Orastes was dead, writhing in Mitra only knew what nameless hell, and Amalric knew his sword would scarcely prevail where the black wisdom of the renegade priest had failed. What grisly abomination Xaltotun plotted lay in the unpredictable future. Conan and his host were a present menace against which Xaltotun's wizardry might well be needed before the play was all played.____They came to Tanasul, a small fortified village at the spot where a reef of rocks made a natural bridge across the river, passable always except in times of greatest flood. Scouts brought in the news that Conan had taken up his position in the Goralian hills, which began to rise a few miles beyond the river. And just before sundown the

Gundermen had arrived in his camp. ___Amalric looked at Xaltotun, inscrutable and alien in the light of the flaring torches. Night had fallen. ___'What now? Your magic has failed. Conan confronts us with an army nearly as strong as our own, and he has the advantage of position. We have a choice of two evils: to camp here and await his attack, or to fall back toward Tarantia and await reinforcements.' ___'We are ruined if we wait,' answered Xaltotun. 'Cross the river and camp on the plain. We will attack at dawn.' ___'But his position is too strong!' exclaimed Amalric. ___'Fool!' A gust of passion broke the veneer of the wizard's calm. 'Have you forgotten Valkia? Because some obscure elemental principle prevented the flood do you deem me helpless? I had intended that your spears should exterminate our enemies; but do not fear: it is my arts shall crush their host. Conan is in a trap. He will never see another sun set. Cross the river!' ___They crossed by the flare of torches. The hoofs of the horses clinked on the rocky bridge, splashed through the shallows. The glint of the torches on shields and breast-plates was reflected redly in the black water. The rock bridge was broad on which they crossed, but even so it was past midnight before the host was camped in the plain beyond. Above them they could see fires winking redly in the distance. Conan had turned at bay in the Goralian hills, which had more than once before served as the last stand of an Aquilonian king. ___Amalric left his pavilion and strode restlessly through the camp. A weird glow flickered in Xaltotun's tent, and from time to time a demoniacal cry slashed the silence, and there was a low sinister muttering of a drum that rustled rather than rumbled. ___Amalric, his instincts whetted by the night and the circumstances, felt that Xaltotun was opposed by more than physical force. Doubts of the wizard's power assailed him. He glanced at the fires high above him, and his face set in grim lines. He and his army were deep in the midst of a hostile country. Up there among those hills lurked thousands of wolfish figures out of whose hearts and souls all emotion and hope had been scourged except a frenzied hate for their conquerors, a mad lust for vengeance. Defeat meant annihilation, retreat through a land swarming with blood-mad enemies. And on the morrow he must hurl his host against the grimmest fighter in the western nations, and his desperate horde. If Xaltotun failed them now? ___Half a dozen men-at-arms strode out of the shadows. The firelight glinted on their breast-plates and helmet crests. Among them they half led, half dragged a gaunt figure in tattered rags. ___Saluting, they spoke: 'My lord, this man came to the outposts and said he desired word with King Valerius. He is an Aquilonian.' ___He looked more like a wolf - a wolf the traps had scarred. Old sores that only fetters make showed on his wrists and ankles. A great brand, the mark of hot iron, disfigured his face. His eyes glared through the tangle of his matted hair as he half crouched before the baron. ___'Who are you, you filthy dog?' demanded the Nemedian. ___'Call me Tiberias,' answered the man, and his teeth clicked in an involuntary spasm. 'I have come to tell you how to trap Conan.' ___'A traitor, eh?' rumbled the baron. ___'Men say you have gold,' mouthed the man, shivering under his rags. 'Give some to me! Give me gold and I will show you how to defeat the king!' His eyes glazed widely, his outstretched, upturned hands were spread like quivering claws. ___Amalric shrugged his shoulder in distaste. But no tool was too base for his use. ___'If you speak the truth you shall have more gold than you can carry,' he said. 'If you are a liar and a spy I will have you crucified head-down. Bring him along.' ___In the tent of Valerius, the baron pointed to the man who crouched shivering before them, huddling his rags about him. ___'He says

he knows a way to aid us on the morrow. We will need aid, if Xaltotun's plan is no better than it has proved so far. Speak on, dog.'___The man's body writhed in strange convulsions. Words came in a stumbling rush:___'Conan camps at the head of the Valley of Lions. It is shaped like a fan, with steep hills on either side. If you attack him tomorrow you will have to march straight up the valley. You cannot climb the hills on either side. But if King Valerius will deign to accept my service, I will guide him through the hills and show him how he can come upon King Conan from behind. But if it is to be done at all, we must start soon. It is many hours' riding, for one must go miles to the west, then miles to the north, then turn eastward and so come into the Valley of Lions from behind, as the Gundermen came.'___Amalric hesitated, tugging his chin. In these chaotic times it was not rare to find men willing to sell their souls for a few gold pieces.___'If you lead me astray you will die,' said Valerius. 'You are aware of that, are you not?'___The man shivered, but his wide eyes did not waver.___'If I betray you, slay me!'___'Conan will not dare divide his force,' mused Amalric. 'He will need all his men to repel our attack. He cannot spare any to lay ambushes in the hills. Besides, this fellow knows his hide depends on his leading you as he promised. Would a dog like him sacrifice himself? Nonsense! No, Valerius, I believe the man is honest.'___'Or a greater thief than most, for he would sell his liberator,' laughed Valerius. 'Very well. I will follow the dog. How many men can you spare me?'___'Five thousand should be enough,' answered Amalric. 'A surprise attack on their rear will throw them into confusion, and that will be enough. I shall expect your attack about noon.'___'You will know when I strike,' answered Valerius.___As Amalric returned to his pavilion he noted with gratification that Xaltotun was still in his tent, to judge from the blood-freezing cries that shuddered forth into the night air from time to time. When presently he heard the clink of steel and the jingle of bridles in the outer darkness, he smiled grimly. Valerius had about served his purpose. The baron knew that Conan was like a wounded lion that rends and tears even in his death-throes. When Valerius struck from the rear, the desperate strokes of the Cimmerian might well wipe his rival out of existence before he himself succumbed. So much the better. Amalric felt he could well dispense with Valerius, once he had paved the way for a Nemedian victory.___The five thousand horsemen who accompanied Valerius were hard-bitten Aquilonian renegades for the most part. In the still starlight they moved out of the sleeping camp, following the westward trend of the great black masses that rose against the stars ahead of them. Valerius rode at their head, and beside him rode Tiberias, a leather thong about his wrist gripped by a man-at-arms who rode on the other side of him. Others kept close behind with drawn swords.___'Play us false and you die instantly,' Valerius pointed out. 'I do not know every sheep-path in these hills, but I know enough about the general configuration of the country to know the directions we must take to come in behind the Valley of Lions. See that you do not lead us astray.'___The man ducked his head and his teeth chattered as he volubly assured his captor of his loyalty, staring up stupidly at the banner that floated over him, the golden serpent of the old dynasty.___Skirting the extremities of the hills that locked the Valley of Lions, they swung wide to the west. An hour's ride and they turned north, forging through wild and rugged hills, following dim trails and tortuous paths. Sunrise found them some miles northwest of Conan's position, and here the guide turned eastward and led them through a maze of labyrinths and crags. Valerius nodded, judging their position

by various peaks thrusting up above the others. He had kept his bearings in a general way, and he knew they were still headed in the right direction. ___But now, without warning, a gray fleecy mass came billowing down from the north, veiling the slopes, spreading out through the valleys. It blotted out the sun; the world became a blind gray void in which visibility was limited to a matter of yards. Advance became a stumbling, groping muddle. Valerius cursed. He could no longer see the peaks that had served him as guide-posts. He must depend wholly upon the traitorous guide. The golden serpent drooped in the windless air. ___Presently Tiberias seemed himself confused; he halted, stared about uncertainly. ___'Are you lost, dog?' demanded Valerius harshly. ___'Listen!' ___Somewhere ahead of them a faint vibration began, the rhythmic rumble of a drum. ___'Conan's drum!' exclaimed the Aquilonian. ___'If we are close enough to hear the drum,' said Valerius, 'why do we not hear the shouts and the clang of arms? Surely battle has joined.' ___'The gorges and the winds play strange tricks,' answered Tiberias, his teeth chattering with the ague that is frequently the lot of men who have spent much time in damp underground dungeons. Listen!' ___Faintly to their ears came a low muffled roar. ___'They are fighting down in the valley!' cried Tiberias. 'The drum is beating on the heights. Let us hasten!' ___He rode straight on toward the sound of the distant drum as one who knows his ground at last. Valerius followed, cursing the fog. Then it occurred to him that it would mask his advance. Conan could not see him coming. He would be at the Cimmerian's back before the noonday sun dispelled the mists. ___Just now he could not tell what lay on either hand, whether cliffs, thickets or gorges. The drum throbbed unceasingly, growing louder as they advanced, but they heard no more of the battle. Valerius had no idea toward what point of the compass they were headed. He started as he saw gray rock walls looming through the smoky drifts on either hand, and realized that they were riding through a narrow defile. But the guide showed no sign of nervousness, and Valerius hove a sigh of relief when the walls widened out and became invisible in the fog. They were through the defile; if an ambush had been planned, it would have been made in that pass. ___But now Tiberias halted again. The drum was rumbling louder, and Valerius could not determine from what direction the sound was coming. Now it seemed ahead of him, now behind, now on one hand or the other. Valerius glared about him impatiently, sitting on his war-horse with wisps of mist curling about him and the moisture gleaming on his armor. Behind him the long lines of steel-clad riders faded away and away like phantoms into the mist. ___'Why do you tarry, dog?' he demanded. ___The man seemed to be listening to the ghostly drum. Slowly he straightened in his saddle, turned his head and faced Valerius, and the smile on his lips was terrible to see. ___'The fog is thinning, Valerius,' he said in a new voice, pointing a bony finger. 'Look!' ___The drum was silent. The fog was fading away. First the crests of cliffs came in sight above the gray clouds, tall and spectral. Lower and lower crawled the mists, shrinking, fading. Valerius started up in his stirrups with a cry that the horsemen echoed behind him. On all sides of them the cliffs towered. They were not in a wide, open valley as he had supposed. They were in a blind gorge walled by sheer cliffs hundreds of feet high. The only entrance or exit was that narrow defile through which they had ridden. ___'Dog!' Valerius struck Tiberias full in the mouth with his clenched mailed hand. 'What devil's trick is this?' ___Tiberias spat out a mouthful of blood and shook with fearful laughter. ___'A trick that shall rid the world of a beast! Look, dog!' ___Again Valerius cried out, more in fury than in

fear.____The defile was blocked by a wild and terrible band of men who stood silent as images - ragged, shock-headed men with spears in their hands - hundreds of them. And up on the cliffs appeared other faces - thousands of faces - wild, gaunt, ferocious faces, marked by fire and steel and starvation.____'A trick of Conan's!' raged Valerius.____'Conan knows nothing of it,' laughed Tiberias. 'It was the plot of broken men, of men you ruined and turned to beasts. Amalric was right. Conan has not divided his army. We are the rabble who followed him, the wolves who skulked in these hills, the homeless men, the hopeless men. This was our plan, and the priests of Asura aided us with their mist. Look at them, Valerius! Each bears the mark of your hand, on his body or on his heart!____'Look at me! You do not know me, do you, what of this scar your hangman burned upon me? Once you knew me. Once I was lord of Amilius, the man whose sons you murdered, whose daughter your mercenaries ravished and slew. You said I would not sacrifice myself to trap you? Almighty gods, if I had a thousand lives I would give them all to buy your doom!____'And I have bought it! Look on the men you broke, dead men who once played the king! Their hour has come! This gorge is your tomb. Try to climb the cliffs: they are steep, they are high. Try to fight your way back through the defile: spears will block your path, boulders will crush you from above! Dog! I will be waiting for you in hell!'____Throwing back his head he laughed until the rocks rang. Valerius leaned from his saddle and slashed down with his great sword, severing shoulder-bone and breast. Tiberias sank to the earth, still laughing ghastlily through a gurgle of gushing blood.____The drums had begun again, encircling the gorge with guttural thunder; boulders came crashing down; above the screams of dying men shrilled the arrows in blinding clouds from the cliffs._____22 The Road to Acheron_____Dawn was just whitening the east when Amalric drew up his hosts in the mouth of the Valley of Lions. This valley was flanked by low, rolling but steep hills, and the floor pitched upward in a series of irregular natural terraces. On the uppermost of these terraces Conan's army held its position, awaiting the attack. The host that had joined him, marching down from Gunderland, had not been composed exclusively of spearmen. With them had come seven thousand Bossonian archers, and four thousand barons and their retainers of the north and west, swelling the ranks of his cavalry.____The pikemen were drawn up in a compact wedge-shaped formation at the narrow head of the valley. There were nineteen thousand of them, mostly Gundermen, though some four thousand were Aquilonians of other provinces. They were flanked on either hand by five thousand Bossonian archers. Behind the ranks of the pikemen the knights sat their steeds motionless, lances raised: ten thousand knights of Poitain, nine thousand Aquilonians, barons and their retainers.____It was a strong position. His flanks could not be turned, for that would mean climbing the steep, wooded hills in the teeth of the arrows and swords of the Bossonians. His camp lay directly behind him, in a narrow, steep-walled valley which was indeed merely a continuation of the Valley of Lions, pitching up at a higher level. He did not fear a surprise from the rear, because the hills behind him were full of refugees and broken men whose loyalty to him was beyond question.____But if his position was hard to shake, it was equally hard to escape from. It was a trap as well as a fortress for the defenders, a desperate last stand of men who did not expect to survive unless they were victorious. The only line of retreat possible was through the narrow valley at their rear.____Xaltotun mounted a hill on the left side of the valley, near the wide mouth. This hill rose higher than the others, and was known as the King's Altar, for a reason long forgotten.

Only Xaltotun knew, and his memory dated back three thousand years. He was not alone. His two familiars, silent, hairy, furtive and dark, were with him, and they bore a young Aquilonian girl, bound hand and foot. They laid her on an ancient stone, which was curiously like an altar, and which crowned the summit of the hill. For long centuries it had stood there, worn by the elements until many doubted that it was anything but a curiously shapen natural rock. But what it was, and why it stood there, Xaltotun remembered from of old. The familiars went away, with their bent backs like silent gnomes, and Xaltotun stood alone beside the altar, his dark beard blown in the wind, overlooking the valley. He could see clear back to the winding Shirki, and up into the hills beyond the head of the valley. He could see the gleaming wedge of steel drawn up at the head of the terraces, the burganets of the archers glinting among the rocks and bushes, the silent knights motionless on their steeds, their pennons flowing above their helmets, their lances rising in a bristling thicket. Looking in the other direction he could see the long serried lines of the Nemedians moving in ranks of shining steel into the mouth of the valley. Behind them the gay pavilions of the lords and knights and the drab tents of the common soldiers stretched back almost to the river. Like a river of molten steel the Nemedian host flowed into the valley, the great scarlet dragon rippling over it. First marched the bowmen, in even ranks, arbalests half raised, bolts nocked, fingers on triggers. After them came the pikemen, and behind them the real strength of the army - the mounted knights, their banners unfurled to the wind, their lances lifted, walking their great steeds forward as if they rode to a banquet. And higher up on the slopes the smaller Aquilonian host stood grimly silent. There were thirty thousand Nemedian knights, and, as in most Hyborian nations, it was the chivalry which was the sword of the army. The footmen were used only to clear the way for a charge of the armored knights. There were twenty-one thousand of these, pikemen and archers. The bowmen began loosing as they advanced, without breaking ranks, launching their quarrels with a whir and tang. But the bolts fell short or rattled harmlessly from the overlapping shields of the Gundermen. And before the arbalesters could come within killing range, the arching shafts of the Bossonians were wreaking havoc in their ranks. A little of this, a futile attempt at exchanging fire, and the Nemedian bowmen began falling back in disorder. Their armor was light, their weapons no match for the Bossonian longbows. The western archers were sheltered by bushes and rocks. Moreover, the Nemedian footmen lacked something of the morale of the horsemen, knowing as they did that they were being used merely to clear the way for the knights. The crossbowmen fell back, and between their opening lines the pikemen advanced. These were largely mercenaries, and their masters had no compunction about sacrificing them. They were intended to mask the advance of the knights until the latter were within smiting distance. So while the arbalesters plied their bolts from either flank at long range, the pikemen marched into the teeth of the blast from above, and behind them the knights came on. When the pikemen began to falter beneath the savage hail of death that whistled down the slopes among them, a trumpet blew, their companies divided to right and left, and through them the mailed knights thundered. They ran full into a cloud of stinging death. The clothyard shafts found every crevice in their armor and the housings of the steeds. Horses scrambling up the grassy terraces reared and plunged backward, bearing their riders with them. Steel-clad forms littered the slopes. The charge wavered and ebbed back. Back down in the valley

Amalric reformed his ranks. Tarascus was fighting with drawn sword under the scarlet dragon, but it was the baron of Tor who commanded that day. Amalric swore as he glanced at the forest of lance-tips visible above and beyond the head-pieces of the Gundermen. He had hoped his retirement would draw the knights out in a charge down the slopes after him, to be raked from either flank by his bowmen and swamped by the numbers of his horsemen. But they had not moved. Camp-servants brought skins of water from the river. Knights doffed their helmets and drenched their sweating heads. The wounded on the slopes screamed vainly for water. In the upper valley, springs supplied the defenders. They did not thirst that long, hot spring day. ___On the King's Altar, beside the ancient, carven stone, Xalto-tun watched the steel tide ebb and flow. On came the knights, with waving plumes and dipping lances. Through a whistling cloud of arrows they plowed to break like a thundering wave on the bristling wall of spears and shields. Axes rose and fell above the plumed helmets, spears thrust upward, bringing down horses and riders. The pride of the Gundermen was no less fierce than that of the knights. They were not spear-fodder, to be sacrificed for the glory of better men. They were the finest infantry in the world, with a tradition that made their morale unshakable. The kings of Aquilonia had long learned the worth of unbreakable infantry. They held their formation unshaken; over their gleaming ranks flowed the great lion banner, and at the tip of the wedge a giant figure in black armor roared and smote like a hurricane, with a dripping ax that split steel and bone alike. ___The Nemedians fought as gallantly as their traditions of high courage demanded. But they could not break the iron wedge, and from the wooded knolls on either hand arrows raked their close-packed ranks mercilessly. Their own bowmen were useless, their pikemen unable to climb the heights and come to grips with the Bossonians. Slowly, stubbornly, sullenly, the grim knights fell back, counting their empty saddles. Above them the Gundermen made no outcry of triumph. They closed their ranks, locking up the gaps made by the fallen. Sweat ran into their eyes from under their steel caps. They gripped their spears and waited, their fierce hearts swelling with pride that a king should fight on foot with them. Behind them the Aquilonian knights had not moved. They sat their steeds, grimly immobile. ___A knight spurred a sweating horse up the hill called the King's Altar, and glared at Xaltotun with bitter eyes. ___'Amalric bids me say that it is time to use your magic, wizard,' he said. 'We are dying like flies down there in the valley. We cannot break their ranks.' ___Xaltotun seemed to expand, to grow tall and awesome and terrible. ___'Return to Amalric,' he said. 'Tell him to reform his ranks for a charge, but to await my signal. Before that signal is given he will see a sight that he will remember until he lies dying!' ___The knight saluted as if compelled against his will, and thundered down the hill at breakneck pace. ___Xaltotun stood beside the dark altarstone and stared across the valley, at the dead and wounded men on the terraces, at the grim, blood-stained band at the head of the slopes, at the dusty, steel-clad ranks reforming in the vale below. He glanced up at the sky, and he glanced down at the slim white figure on the dark stone. And lifting a dagger inlaid with archaic hieroglyphs, he intoned an immemorial invocation: ___'Set, god of darkness, scaly lord of the shadows, by the blood of a virgin and the sevenfold symbol I call to your sons below the black earth! Children of the deeps, below the red earth, under the black earth, awaken and shake your awful manes! Let the hills rock and the stones topple upon my enemies! Let the sky grow dark above them, the earth unstable beneath their feet! Let a wind from the deep black

earth curl up beneath their feet, and blacken and shrivel them?'___He halted short, dagger lifted. In the tense silence the roar of the hosts rose beneath him, borne on the wind.___On the other side of the altar stood a man in a black hooded robe, whose coif shadowed pale delicate features and dark eyes calm and meditative.___'Dog of Asura!' whispered Xaltotun, his voice was like the hiss of an angered serpent. 'Are you mad, that you seek your doom? Ho, Baal! Chiron! '___'Call again, dog of Acheron!' said the other, and laughed. 'Summon them loudly. They will not hear, unless your shouts reverberate in hell.'___From a thicket on the edge of the crest came a somber old woman in peasant garb, her hair flowing over her shoulders, a great gray wolf following at her heels.___'Witch, priest and wolf,' muttered Xaltotun grimly, and laughed. 'Fools, to pit your charlatan's mummery against my arts! With a wave of my hand I brush you from my path! '___'Your arts are straws in the wind, dog of Python,' answered the Asurian. 'Have you wondered why the Shirki did not come down in flood and trap Conan on the other bank? When I saw the lightning in the night I guessed your plan, and my spells dispersed the clouds you had summoned before they could empty their torrents. You did not even know that your rain-making wizardry had failed.'___'You lie!' cried Xaltotun, but the confidence in his voice was shaken. 'I have felt the impact of a powerful sorcery against mine - but no man on earth could undo the rain-magic, once made, unless he possessed the very heart of sorcery.'___'But the flood you plotted did not come to pass,' answered the priest. 'Look at your allies in the valley, Pythonian! You have led them to the slaughter! They are caught in the fangs of the trap, and you cannot aid them. Look! '___He pointed. Out of the narrow gorge of the upper valley, behind the Poitanians, a horseman came flying, whirling something about his head that flashed in the sun. Recklessly he hurtled down the slopes, through the ranks of the Gundermen, who sent up a deep-throated roar and clashed their spears and shields like thunder in the hills. On the terraces between the hosts the sweat-soaked horse reared and plunged, and his wild rider yelled and brandished the thing in his hands like one demented. It was the torn remnant of a scarlet banner, and the sun struck dazzlingly on the golden scales of a serpent that writhed thereon.___'Valerius is dead!' cried Hadrathus ringingly. 'A fog and a drum lured him to his doom! I gathered that fog, dog of Python, and I dispersed it! I, with my magic which is greater than your magic! '___'What matters it?' roared Xaltotun, a terrible sight, his eyes blazing, his features convulsed. 'Valerius was a fool. I do not need him. I can crush Conan without human aid! '___'Why have you delayed?' mocked Hadrathus. 'Why have you allowed so many of your allies to fall pierced by arrows and spitted on spears? '___'Because blood aids great sorcery!' thundered Xaltotun, in a voice that made the rocks quiver. A lurid nimbus played about his awful head. 'Because no wizard wastes his strength thoughtlessly. Because I would conserve my powers for the great days to be, rather than employ them in a hill-country brawl. But now, by Set, I shall loose them to the uttermost! Watch, dog of Asura, false priest of an outworn god, and see a sight that shall blast your reason for evermore! '___Hadrathus threw back his head and laughed, and hell was in his laughter.___'Look, black devil of Python! '___His hand came from under his robe holding something that flamed and burned in the sun, changing the light to a pulsing golden glow in which the flesh of Xaltotun looked like the flesh of a corpse.___Xaltotun cried out as if he had been stabbed. 'The Heart! The Heart of Ahriman!' 'Aye! The one power that is greater than your power!' Xaltotun seemed to shrivel, to grow old. Suddenly his beard was shot with snow, his locks flecked with gray.___'The Heart!'

he mumbled. 'You stole it! Dog! Thief!' 'Not I! It has been on a long journey far to the southward. But now it is in my hands, and your black arts cannot stand against it. As it resurrected you, so shall it hurl you back into the night whence it drew you. You shall go down the dark road to Acheron, which is the road of silence and the night. The dark empire, unreborn, shall remain a legend and a black memory. Conan shall reign again. And the Heart of Ahriman shall go back into the cavern below the temple of Mitra, to burn as a symbol of the power of Aquilonia for a thousand years!'___Xaltotun screamed inhumanly and rushed around the altar, dagger lifted; but from somewhere - out of the sky, perhaps, or the great jewel that blazed in the hand of Hadrathus - shot a jetting beam of blinding blue light. Full against the breast of Xaltotun it flashed, and the hills re-echoed the concussion. The wizard of Acheron went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, and before he touched the ground he was fearfully altered. Beside the altar-stone lay no fresh-slain corpse, but a shriveled mummy, a brown, dry, unrecognizable carcass sprawling among moldering swathings. ___Somberly old Zelata looked down. ___'He was not a living man,' she said. 'The Heart lent him a false aspect of life, that deceived even himself. I never saw him as other than a mummy.' ___Hadrathus bent to unbind the swooning girl on the altar, when from among the trees appeared a strange apparition - Xaltotun's chariot drawn by the weird horses. Silently they advanced to the altar and halted, with the chariot wheel almost touching the brown withered thing on the grass. Hadrathus lifted the body of the wizard and placed it in the chariot. And without hesitation the uncanny steeds turned and moved off southward, down the hill. And Hadrathus and Zelata and the gray wolf watched them go - down the long road to Acheron which is beyond the ken of men. ___Down in the valley Amalric had stiffened in his saddle when he saw that wild horseman curvetting and caracoling on the slopes while he brandished that blood-stained serpent-banner. Then some instinct jerked his head about, toward the hill known as the King's Altar. And his lips parted. Every man in the valley saw it - an arching shaft of dazzling light that towered up from the summit of the hill, showering golden fire. High above the hosts it burst in a blinding blaze that momentarily paled the ___'That's not Xaltotun's signal!' roared the baron. ___'No!' shouted Tarascus. 'It's a signal to the Aquilonians! ___Above them the immobile ranks were moving at last, and a deep-throated roar thundered across the vale. ___'Xaltotun has failed us!' bellowed Amalric furiously. 'Valerius has failed us! We have been led into a trap! Mitra's curse on Xaltotun who led us here! Sound the retreat!' ___'Too later yelled Tarascus. 'Look? ___Up on the slopes the forest of lances dipped, leveled. The ranks of the Gundermen rolled back to right and left like a parting curtain. And with a thunder like the rising roar of a hurricane, the knights of Aquilonia crashed down the slopes. ___The impetus of that charge was irresistible. Bolts driven by the demoralized arbalesters glanced from their shields, their bent helmets. Their plumes and pennons streaming out behind them, their lances lowered, they swept over the wavering lines of pikemen and roared down the slopes like a wave. ___Amalric yelled an order to charge, and the Nemedians with desperate courage spurred their horses at the slopes. They still outnumbered the attackers. ___But they were weary men on tired horses, charging uphill. The onrushing knights had not struck a blow that day. Their horses were fresh. They were coming downhill and they came like a thunderbolt. And like a thunderbolt they smote the struggling ranks of the Nemedians - smote them, split them apart, ripped them asunder and dashed the remnants headlong down the

slopes.____After them on foot came the Gundermen, blood-mad, and the Bossonians were swarming down the hills, loosing as they ran at every foe that still moved.____Down the slopes washed the tide of battle, the dazed Nemedians swept on the crest of the wave. Their archers had thrown down their arbalests and were fleeing. Such pikemen as had survived the blasting charge of the knights were cut to pieces by the ruthless Gundermen.____In a wild confusion the battle swept through the wide mouth of the valley and into the plain beyond. All over the plain swarmed the warriors, fleeing and pursuing, broken into single combat and clumps of smiting, hacking knights on rearing, wheeling horses. But the Nemedians were smashed, broken, unable to re-form or make a stand. By the hundreds they broke away, spurring for the river. Many reached it, rushed across and rode eastward. The countryside was up behind them; the people hunted them like wolves. Few ever reached Tarantia.____The final break did not come until the fall of Amalric. The baron, striving in vain to rally his men, rode straight at the clump of knights that followed the giant in black armor whose surcoat bore the royal lion, and over whose head floated the golden lion banner with the scarlet leopard of Poitain beside it. A tall warrior in gleaming armor couched his lance and charged to meet the lord of Tor. They met like a thunderclap. The Nemedian's lance, striking his foe's helmet, snapped bolts and rivets and tore off the casque, revealing the features of Pallantides. But the Aquilonian's lance-head crashed through shield and breast-plate to transfix the baron's heart.____A roar went up as Amalric was hurled from his saddle, snapping the lance that impaled him, and the Nemedians gave way as a barrier bursts under the surging impact of a tidal wave. They rode for the river in a blind stampede that swept the plain like a whirlwind. The hour of the Dragon had passed.____Tarascus did not flee. Amalric was dead, the color-bearer slain, and the royal Nemedian banner trampled in the blood and dust. Most of his knights were fleeing and the Aquilonians were riding them down; Tarascus knew the day was lost, but with a handful of faithful followers he raged through the melee, conscious of but one desire - to meet Conan, the Cimmerian. And at last he met him.____Formations had been destroyed utterly, close-knit bands broken asunder and swept apart. The crest of Trocero gleamed in one part of the plain, those of Prospero and Pallantides in others. Conan was alone. The house-troops of Tarascus had fallen one by one. The two kings met man to man.____Even as they rode at each other, the horse of Tarascus sobbed and sank under him. Conan leaped from his own steed and ran at him, as the king of Nemedias disengaged himself and rose. Steel flashed blindingly in the sun, clashed loudly, and blue sparks flew; then a clang of armor as Tarascus measured his full length on the earth beneath a thunderous stroke of Conan's broadsword.____The Cimmerian placed a mail-shod foot on his enemy's breast, and lifted his sword. His helmet was gone; he shook back his black mane and his blue eyes blazed with their old fire.____'Do you yield?'____'Will you give me quarter?' demanded the Nemedian.____'Aye. Better than you'd have given me, you dog. Life for you and all your men who throw down their arms. Though I ought to split your head for an infernal thief,' the Cimmerian added.____Tarascus twisted his neck and glared over the plain. The remnants of the Nemedian host were flying across the stone bridge with swarms of victorious Aquilonians at their heels, smiting with fury of gluttonous vengeance. Bossonians and Gundermen were swarming through the camp of their enemies, tearing the tents to pieces in search of plunder, seizing prisoners, ripping open the baggage and upsetting the wagons.____Tarascus cursed fervently, and then shrugged his shoulders,

as well as he could, under the circumstances.____'Very well. I have no choice. What are your demands?'____'Surrender to me all your present holdings in Aquilonia. Order your garrisons to march out of the castles and towns they hold, without their arms, and get your infernal armies out of Aquilonia as quickly as possible. In addition you shall return all Aquilonians sold as slaves, and pay an indemnity to be designated later, when the damage your occupation of the country has caused has been properly estimated. You will remain as hostage until these terms have been carried out.'____'Very well,' surrendered Tarascus. 'I will surrender all the castles and towns now held by my garrisons without resistance, and all the other things shall be done. What ransom for my body?'____Conan laughed and removed his foot from his foe's steel-clad breast, grasped his shoulder and heaved him to his feet. He started to speak, then turned to see Hadrathus approaching him. The priest was as calm and self-possessed as ever, picking his way between rows of dead men and horses.____Conan wiped the sweat-smear dust from his face with a blood-stained hand. He had fought all through the day, first on foot with the pikemen, then in the saddle, leading the charge. His surcoat was gone, his armor splashed with blood and battered with strokes of sword, mace and ax. He loomed gigantically against a background of blood and slaughter, like some grim pagan hero of mythology.____'Well done, Hadrathus!' quoth he gustily. 'By Crom, I am glad to see your signal! My knights were almost mad with impatience and eating their hearts out to be at sword-strokes. I could not have held them much longer. What of the wizard?'____'He has gone down the dim road to Acheron,' answered Hadrathus. 'And I - I am for Tarantia. My work is done here, and I have a task to perform at the temple of Mitra. All our work is done here. On this field we have saved Aquilonia - and more than Aquilonia. Your ride to your capital will be a triumphal procession through a kingdom mad with joy. All Aquilonia will be cheering the return of their king. And so, until we meet again in the great royal hall - farewell!'____Conan stood silently watching the priest as he went. From various parts of the field knights were hurrying toward him. He saw Pallantides, Trocero, Prospero, Servius Galannus, their armor splashed with crimson. The thunder of battle was giving way to a roar of triumph and acclaim. All eyes, hot with strife and shining with exultation, were turned toward the great black figure of the king; mailed arms brandished red-stained swords. A confused torrent of sound rose, deep and thunderous as the sea-surf: 'Hail, Conan, king of Aquilonia!'____Tarascus spoke.____'You have not yet named my ransom.'____Conan laughed and slapped his sword home in its scabbard. He flexed his mighty arms, and ran his blood-stained fingers through his thick black locks, as if feeling there his re-won crown.____'There is a girl in your seraglio named Zenobia.'____'Why, yes, so there is.'____'Very well.' The king smiled as at an exceedingly pleasant memory. 'She shall be your ransom, and naught else. I will come to Belverus for her as I promised. She was a slave in Nemedra, but I will make her queen of Aquilonia!'_____CIMMERIA_____I remember_____The dark woods, masking slopes of sombre bills; _____The gray clouds' leaden everlasting arch; _____The dusky streams that flowed without a sound, _____And the lone winds that whispered down the passes._____Vista an vista marching, hills on hills,_____Slope beyond slope, each dark -with sullen trees,_____Our gaunt land lay. So when a man climbed up_____A rugged peak and gazed, his shaded eye_____Saw but the endless vista - hill on hill,_____Slope beyond slope, each hooded like its brothers._____It was a gloomy land that seemed to hold_____All winds and clouds and dreams that shun the sun,_____With bare boughs

rattling in the lonesome winds, ___And the dark woodlands brooding over all, ___Not even lightened by the rare dim sun ___Which made squat shadows out of men; they called it ___Cimmeria, land of Darkness and deep Night. ___It was so long ago and far away ___I have forgot the very name men called me. ___The ax and flint-tipped spear are like a dream, ___And hunts and wars are shadows. I recall ___Only the stillness of that somber land; ___The clouds that piled forever on the hills, ___The dimness of the everlasting woods. ___Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night. ___Oh, soul of mine, bom out of shadowed hills, ___To clouds and winds and ghosts that shun the sun, ___How many deaths shall serve to break at last ___This heritage which wraps me in the gray ___Apparel of ghosts? I search my heart and find ___Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the

Night. _____AFTERWORD: _____ Robert E. Howard and Conan: The Final Years ___by Stephen Jones _____Despite enjoying an all-time high in sales during 1935 to such diverse pulp magazines as Action Stories, Argosy, Dime Sports Magazine, Spicy-Adventure Stories, Star Western, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Mystery, Top-Notch, Western Aces and, of course, Weird Tales, Robert E. Howard had started talking about taking his own life when it appeared that his mother was dying of tuberculosis. As his father, Dr I. M. Howard later recalled: 'Last March a year ago, again when his mother was very low in the King's Daughters Hospital in Temple, Texas, Dr McCelvey expressed a fear that she would not recover; he began to talk to me about his business, and I at once understood what it meant. I began to talk to him, trying to dissuade him from such a course, but his mother began to improve. Immediately she began to improve, he became cheerful and no more was said.' ___Ignored or simply dismissed as eccentric by most of the inhabitants of his home town of Cross Plains, Texas, Howard began to exhibit even more bizarre behaviour. He had told writer E. Hoffman Price the previous year: 'Nobody thinks I amount to much, so I am proud to show these people that a successful writer thinks enough of me to drive a thousand miles to hell and gone out of his way to visit me.' ___Howard now decided to grow a long walrus moustache and walk around town dressed somewhat unconventionally, as Novalyne Price Ellis described in her memoir One Who Walked Alone: The first thing that startled me was the black sombrero he had on. It was a real Mexican sombrero with little balls dangling from its rim. The chin strap was a thin little strip of leather attached to the hat. It came down and was tied under his chin. The vaqueros used the chin strap to keep their hats from being blown off by the incessant winds that swept the plains. But the flat crown and chin strap made Bob's face look rounder than ever . . . The red bandana around his neck was tied in the back. He didn't have on those old short, brown pants. Not this year! He had on short, black pants that came to the top of his black shoes.' ___In 'Shadows in Zamboula', which was published in the November 1935 issue of Weird Tales, Conan found himself staying in a city filled with intrigue and cannibalism. Howard's original title for the story had been 'The Man-Eaters of Zamboula'. The issue once again featured a Conan cover by Margaret Brundage, with a naked Nafertari surrounded by four hissing cobras. However, the story was closely beaten in the readers' poll by 'The Way Home' by Paul Frederick Stern (a pen-name for writer Paul Ernst). ___At around 75,000 words, Howard's next entry in the series was twice as long as any other Conan story and Howard's only completed novel. Written over four months in the spring of 1934, he cannibalised and expanded a number of his earlier Conan stories - specifically 'The Scarlet Citadel', 'Black Colossus' and 'The Devil in

Iron' - to create one of his finest and most mature works.____According to Howard, 'Conan was about forty when he seized the crown of Aquilonia, and was about forty-four or forty-five at the time of 'The Hour of the Dragon'. He had no male heir at that time, because he had never bothered to formally make some woman his queen, and the sons of concubines, of which he had a goodly number, were not recognized as heirs to the throne.'____Howard had already had several stories reprinted between hardcovers in Britain in the Not at Night series of horror anthologies edited by Christine Campbell Thomson (including the Conan story 'Rogues in the House', which appeared in the 1934 volume Terror at Night). The Hour of the Dragon was submitted to British publisher Denis Archer in May 1934. The year before, Archer had turned down a collection of Howard's stories (which featured two Conan tales) with the suggestion that 'any time you find yourself able to produce a full-length novel of about 70,000?75,000 words along the lines of the stories, my allied Company, Pawling & Ness Ltd., who deal with the lending libraries, and are able to sell a first edition of 5,000 copies, will be very willing to publish it.'____In fact, Archer accepted The Hour of the Dragon, but the publisher went bankrupt and his assets, including Howard's novel, were put into the hands of the Official Receiver. The book was never published, and the story finally appeared as a five-part serial running in Weird Tales from December 1935 to April 1936 (with chapter 20 apparently mis-numbered as chapter 21).____Despite Margaret Brundage's cover depicting her most pathetic-looking Conan ever, chained in a cell while a scantily clad Zenobia hands him the keys, readers reacted favourably to the serial in 'The Eyrrie', the magazine's letters column: 'If "The Hour of the Dragon" ends as good as it began I shall vote Mr Howard your ace writer,' promised a reader from Sioux City, Iowa. 'Robert E. Howard's "Hour of the Dragon" is vividly written, as are all Mr Howard's stories,' praised a reader from Hazleton, Pennsylvania, who continued: 'Conan is at his bloodthirsty worst, killing off his enemies left and right; lovely damozels walk about in scanty shifts and pine to be held in his muscular arms - so what more could one want, I ask you?'____However, the Brundage controversy continued to rage: 'I was greatly pleased with the stories in the December WT, but at the same time greatly disappointed with Mrs Brundage's illustration of Conan,' complained a reader from Washington D.C. 'From Howard's stories I have always pictured Conan as a rough, muscular, scarred figure of giant stature with thick, wiry, black hair covering his massive chest, powerful arms, and muscular legs; and a face that's as rugged as the weather-beaten face of an old sea captain.'____Howard expressed his own opinion of Brundage's work in a letter in the June 1936 issue: 'Enthusiasm impels me to pause from burning spines off cactus for my drouth-bedeveled goats long enough to give three slightly dust-choked cheers for the April cover illustration . . . altogether I think it's the best thing Mrs Brundage has done since she illustrated my "Black Colossus". And that's no depreciation of the covers done between these master-pictures.'____'Howard was my favourite author,' Brundage recalled many years later, 'I always liked his stories best.'____In terms of Conan's history, 'The Hour of the Dragon' (which was later reprinted under the title Conan the Conqueror) is the final story in the sequence. It was also the last Conan story Howard himself would ever see published.____Howard was still upset over his mother's failing health, as his father later revealed: 'Again this year, in February, while his mother was very sick and not expected to live but a few days, at that time she was in the Shannon Hospital in San Angelo, Texas. San Angelo is something like one hundred miles from

here. He was driving back and forth daily from San Angelo to home. One evening he told me I would find his business, what little there was to it, all carefully written up and in a large envelope in his desk.'___In a letter to Novalyne Price Ellis dated February 14, 1936, Howard admitted: 'You ask how my mother is getting along. I hardly know what to say. Some days she seems to be improving a little, and other days she seems to be worse. I frankly don't know.'___Conan's final appearance in *Weird Tales* was the three-part serial 'Red Nails' in the July, August-September and October 1936 issues. Howard described it as '. . . the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reactions of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung.'___In a letter dated December 5, 1935, he called it '. . . the bloodiest and most sexy weird story I ever wrote. I have been dissatisfied with my handling of decaying races in stories, for the reason that degeneracy is so prevalent in such races that even in fiction it can not be ignored as a motive and as a fact if the fiction is to have any claim to realism. I have ignored it in all other stories, as one of the taboos, but I did not ignore it in this story. When, or if, you ever read it, I'd like to know how you like my handling of the subject of lesbianism.'___In fact, there is only the slightest suggestion of lesbianism in the published version of the story, in which Conan and beautiful Aquilonian mercenary Valeria discovered yet another lost city and battled a monster reptile.___Introducing 'Red Nails' in the July 1936 issue, editor Farnsworth Wright recalled: 'Nearly four years ago, *Weird Tales* published a story called 'The Phoenix on the Sword' built around a barbarian adventurer named Conan, who had become king of a country by sheer force of valor and brute strength . . . The stories of Conan were speedily acclaimed by our readers, and the barbarian's weird adventures became immensely popular. The story presented herewith is one of the most powerful and eery (sic) weird tales yet written about Conan. We commend this story to you, for we know you will enjoy it through and through.'___Margaret Brundage's suggestive cover depicted a naked Valeria about to be sacrificed on an altar by three seductive slave girls. It was the last illustration Brundage would do for a Howard story and with the next issue of *Weird Tales* she ended her continuous run of thirty-nine covers for 'The Unique Magazine'. She would still occasionally make an appearance on the cover over the next nine years, and her final original painting - her sixty-sixth - appeared on the January 1945 issue.___Written in July 1935, 'Red Nails' was the final Conan story - and the final fantasy story - which Howard would complete. With his mother's hospital bills escalating, and *Weird Tales* paying on publication (supposedly) some of the lowest rates in the pulp field, he began to look around for better and more dependable paying markets.___As Howard revealed in a letter dated February 15, 1936, to E. Hoffman Price: 'For myself, I haven't submitted anything to *Weird Tales* for many months, though I would, if payments could be made a little more promptly. I reckon the boys have their troubles, same as me, but my needs are urgent and immediate.'___Price observed that during his 1934 visit to Cross Plains: 'I had often got the impression that Robert was a parent to his parents; that while he could have done the gypsying which other authors permitted themselves, solicitude for his father and mother kept him fairly close to home.'___Novalyne Price Ellis agreed: 'I do think Bob has tried to take over his parents' lives. He said once that parents and children change places in life. When parents become old and sick, you take care of them as you would a

child.'___During the spring of 1936, Hester Howard appeared to grow stronger, much to the relief of her son, as Dr Howard later explained: 'He accepted her condition as one of permanent improvement and one that would continue. I knew well that it would not, but I kept it from him.'___In a letter written to young Wisconsin writer August Derleth, dated May 9, 1936, Howard offered his own thoughts after recent deaths in Derleth's family: 'Death to the old is inevitable, and yet somehow I often feel that it is a greater tragedy than death to the young. When a man dies young he misses much suffering, but the old have only life as a possession and somehow to me the tearing of a pitiful remnant from weak old fingers is more tragic than the looting of a life in its full rich plume. I don't want to live to be old. I want to die when my time comes, quickly and suddenly, in the full tide of my strength and health.'___In a letter dated May 13, he also confided to his old correspondent and fellow Weird Tales writer H. P. Lovecraft that he did not know whether his mother would: '... live or not. She is very weak and weighs only 109 pounds - 150 pounds is her normal weight - and very few kinds of food agree with her; but if she does live, she will owe her life to my father's efforts.'___For three weeks Robert E. Howard continued to maintain an almost constant vigil at his beloved mother's bedside as her condition began to decline rapidly. Atypically, his mood became almost cheerful, as if he had finally made up his mind about something.___Then, on the morning of June 11, 1936, Howard learned from one of two trained nurses attending Mrs Howard that his mother had entered a terminal coma and that she would probably never recognise him again. He rose from beside her sick-bed, slipped out of the house, climbed into his 1935 Chevrolet sedan parked in front of the garage and rolled up the windows. At a few minutes past eight o'clock in the morning, he fired a single bullet from a borrowed Colt .380 automatic into his right temple. He had come to the decision that he would not see his mother die.___The bullet passed through his brain and he survived for eight hours in a coma. He was thirty years old. His mother died shortly after ten o'clock on the evening of the following day, without ever regaining consciousness. She was sixty-six (although she had claimed to be several years younger). They were buried in adjacent graves in identical caskets at Brown-wood's Greenleaf Cemetery.___A strip of paper was discovered in Howard's wallet in his hip pocket after he shot himself. It contained two typewritten lines:___All fled - all done, so lift me on the pyre ?___The Feast is over and the lamps expire.___Having pretty much ignored him for most of his life, on the day of his death the local newspaper reprinted one of Howard's last Western stories, along with a 6,000-word article and an obituary - more space than any citizen of Cross Plains had ever received.___On June 24, 1936, Howard's beloved library of some 300 books and file copies of all the magazines which contained his stories were donated by his father to Howard Payne College to form The Robert E. Howard Memorial Collection. Nine months later Dr Howard reclaimed all his son's magazines because they were falling apart.___In a letter dated June 29, 1936, Dr Howard wrote to Lovecraft: '. . . Robert was a great admirer of you. I have often heard him say that you were the best weird writer in the world, and he keenly enjoyed corresponding with you. Often expressed hope that you might visit in our home some day, so that he, his mother and I might see you and know you personally. Robert greatly admired all weird writers, often heard him speak of each separately and express the highest admiration of all. He said they were a bunch of great men and he admired all of them very much.'___Lovecraft's own 'Robert Ervin Howard: A Memoriam' was

published in the September 1936 issue of Julius Schwartz's Fantasy Magazine: 'The character and attainments of Mr Howard were wholly unique. He was, above everything else, a lover of the simpler, older world of barbarian and pioneer days, when courage and strength took the place of subtlety and stratagem, and when a hardy, fearless race battled and bled, and asked no quarter from hostile nature. All his stories reflect this philosophy, and derive from it a vitality found in few of his contemporaries. No one could write more convincingly of violence and gore than he, and his battle passages reveal an instinctive aptitude for military tactics which would have brought him distinction in times of war. His real gifts were even higher than the readers of his published works would suspect, and had he lived, would have helped him to make his mark in serious literature with some folk epic of his beloved southwest ... Always a disciple of hearty and strenuous living, he suggested more than casually his own famous character - the intrepid warrior, adventurer, and seizer of thrones, Conan the Cimmerian. His loss at the age of thirty is a tragedy of the first magnitude, and a blow from which fantasy fiction will not soon recover.'___While writing those words, Lovecraft could hardly have realised that the world of fantasy fiction would soon be mourning the impact of his own premature death, at the age of forty-seven, little more than nine months later. ___Howard's father continued to correspond with E. Hoffman Price until he died, a lonely old man suffering from diabetes and cataracts in both eyes, on November 12, 1944. As Price later recalled: 'Whenever I think of Dr Howard, well into his seventy-fourth year, and with failing eyesight, having for these past eight years faced alone and single-handed a home and a world from which both wife and son were taken in one day, I can not help but say, "I wish Robert had had more of his father's courage."'___The notice of Howard's death appeared in the August-September issue of Weird Tales: 'As this issue goes to press, we are saddened by the news of the sudden death of Robert E. Howard of Cross Plains, Texas. Mr Howard for years has been one of the most popular magazine authors in the country ... It was in Weird Tales that the cream of his writing appeared. Mr Howard was one of our literary discoveries . . . Prolific though he was, his genius shone through everything he wrote and he did not lower his high literary standards for the sake of mere volume.'___At the time, the magazine still owed Howard \$1,350 for stories it had already published. ___Regular Weird Tales cover artist Margaret Brundage remembered how she learned of the author's death: 'I came into the offices one day and Wright informed me of Howard's suicide. We both just sat around and cried for most of the day. He was always my personal favourite.'___Robert Bloch, who had previously criticised Howard in the magazine wrote: 'Robert E. Howard's death is quite a shock - and a severe blow to WT. Despite my standing opinion of Conan, the fact always remains that Howard was one of WT's finest contributors.'___Although it is true that Robert E. Howard never wrote nor published the Conan stories in any particular sequence, in a letter dated March 10, 1936, to science fiction writer P. Schuyler Miller, the author responded to an attempt by Miller and chemist Dr John D. Clark to put the Conan series into chronological order with his own concept of Conan's eventual fate: 'Frankly I can't predict it. In writing these yarns I've always felt less as creating them than as if I were simply chronicling his adventures as he told them to me. That's why they skip about so much, without following a regular order. The average adventurer, telling tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and

years, as they occur to him.'___The Cimmerian's adventures appeared as the author imagined them - consequently the first two stories published, 'The Phoenix on the Sword' and 'The Scarlet Citadel', feature an older Conan who has already been crowned king of Aquilonia, while the character appears as a teenage thief in the third published tale, 'The Tower of the Elephant'.___One explanation for this apparently random chronology appears in a letter postmarked December 14, 1933, to writer Clark Ashton Smith, in which Howard hinted at a possible preternatural power behind the creation of his character: 'While I don't go so far as to believe that stories are inspired by actually existent spirits or powers (though I am rather opposed to flatly denying anything) I have sometimes wondered if it were possible that unrecognized forces of the past or present - or even the future - work through the thoughts and actions of living men. This occurred to me when I was writing the first stories of the Conan series especially ... I do not attempt to explain this by esoteric or occult means, but the facts remain. I still write of Conan more powerfully and with more understanding than any of my other characters. But the time will probably come when I will suddenly find myself unable to write convincingly of him at all. That has happened in the past with nearly all my rather numerous characters; suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character.'___Howard's death did not mark the end of Conan. The unpublished manuscripts of four completed Conan stories, which had been rejected by Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright, were discovered amongst the author's papers many years after his death.___The first of these, 'The God in the Bowl', appeared in the September 1952 issue of Space Science Fiction. A combination of murder mystery and magic, it was revised considerably for publication by writer L. Sprague de Camp, who produced yet another version of the story, closer to the original manuscript, for paperback publication fifteen years later.___Another greatly abridged version by de Camp of Howard's story 'The Black Stranger' appeared under the title 'The Treasure of Trancos' in the February-March 1953 issue of Fantasy Magazine. This 33,000-word short novel had been written around the same time as 'Beyond the Black River' and 'Wolves Beyond the Border' and mixed Conan with Picts and pirates. When he could not sell it as a Conan adventure, Howard had attempted to rescue the story by turning the hero into swashbuckling pirate Black Vulmea, but it remained unpublished until 1976, when it appeared in the collection Black Vulmea's Vengeance under the title 'Swords of the Red Brotherhood'. The complete version finally saw print, exactly as Howard wrote it, in Karl Edward Wagner's 1987 anthology Echoes of Valor.___Originally rejected by Wright in 1932, Howard had submitted an apparently earlier draft of 'The Frost-Giant's Daughter', featuring the Conan-like hero Amra of Akbitana, to the amateur journal The Fantasy Fan, which had published the story in the March 1934 issue as 'Gods of the North'. When Howard's Conan version appeared in the August 1953 issue of Fantasy Fiction, it had been extensively rewritten by de Camp, and it was not until 1976 that the author's original manuscript finally saw print.___'The Vale of Lost Women' eventually appeared in the Spring 1967 issue of Robert A. W. Lowndes' Magazine of Horror. This story was probably rejected by Wright because of scenes where an older Conan massacred an entire village and the heroine had to barter her virginity in order to be rescued. Reaction to its publication was decidedly mixed: 'The so-called "Conan" story with its fantasy domino slightly askew is a thinly

masked "porny" of the cheapest sado-sexual variety and doesn't belong in your pages,' wrote one reader to the magazine's letters column, while another was of the opinion: 'I cannot imagine why "The Vale of Lost Women" was not published during Howard's lifetime ... It is certainly one of Howard's better works.'___Howard also left behind a number of fragments and brief outlines for never-completed adventures which various authors, including L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter, completed and added to in an attempt to fill in the gaps in Conan's career. Some of these manuscripts were Oriental adventures which the writers then converted into Conan stories by changing names, deleting anachronisms and introducing a supernatural element.___In 1953, Ace Books issued Howard's novel Conan the Conqueror as an 'Ace Double' paperback, bound back-to-back with The Sword of Rhiannon by Leigh Brackett, and the following year the book finally made its British debut, exactly twenty years after it had first been submitted by Howard, in a hardcover edition from T.V. Boardman & Co. of London. Unfortunately, the uncredited dustjacket artist decided to illustrate the same scene that Margaret Brundage had used for her cover of the December 1935 Weird Tales, with equally wretched results!___Between 1950-57 New York's Gnome Press published seven hardcover volumes of Conan stories. These included several tales either edited by or in collaboration with de Camp, who later explained: 'Late in 1951, I stumbled upon a cache of Howard's manuscripts in the apartment of the then literary agent for Howard's estate ... The incomplete state of the Conan saga has tempted me and others to add to it, as Howard might have done had he lived ... The reader must judge how successful our posthumous collaboration with Howard has been.'___However, as author and editor Karl Edward Wagner wrote in 1977, 'The only man who could write a Robert E. Howard story was Robert E. Howard. It is far more than a matter of imitating adjective usage or analyzing comma-splices. It is a matter of spirit. Pastiche-Conan is not the same as Conan as portrayed by Robert E. Howard. Read such, as it pleases you - but don't delude yourself into thinking that this is any more Robert E. Howard's Conan than a Conan story you decided to write yourself. It is this editor's belief that a Conan collection should contain only Robert E. Howard's Conan tales, and that no editorial emendations should alter the authenticity of Howard's creation.' And this coming from one of the better writers of Howard pastiches.___In fact, Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright had told his readers much the same thing four decades earlier: 'Sorry to deny your request for some other author to carry on the Conan stories of the late Robert E. Howard. His work was touched with genius, and he had a distinctive style of writing that put the stamp of his personality on every story he wrote. It would hardly be fair to his memory if we allowed Conan to be recreated by another hand, no matter how skilful.'___Amateur publications such as Glenn Lord's The Howard Collector, George H. Scithers' Amra and The Robert E. Howard United Press Association (REHupa) rekindled interest in Howard's fiction during the 1960s and '70s, and beginning in 1966 Lancer Books in America, and later Sphere Books in Britain, collected the Conan stories into a series of twelve paperbacks, many of which featured distinctive cover paintings by Frank Frazetta. Edited by L. Sprague de Camp, once again Howard's original texts were altered, and the series included revisions, posthumous collaborations, fixed-up novels and totally new pastiches. Over a million copies of the Lancer editions were sold during the first few years of publication, ranking Howard second only to J. R. R. Tolkien in the field of fantasy fiction.___In 1957 a Swedish fan named Bjorn Nyberg had collaborated with L. Sprague

de Camp on a new novel entitled *The Return of Conan*, and with Howard's renewed popularity, soon other authors were adding original novels to the Conan canon. These included Karl Edward Wagner, Poul Anderson, Andrew J. Offutt, Robert Jordan, John Maddox Roberts, Steve Perry, Roland Green, Leonard Carpenter and John C. Hocking.____Thirty-five years after his creator's death, Howard's mighty Cimmerian had turned into a money-spinning franchise.____In October 1970, Marvel Comics Group launched its hugely successful *Conan the Barbarian* title, written by Roy Thomas and initially illustrated by artist Barry (Windsor-)Smith. Many issues adapted or were based on Howard's original stories, and there was even a two-issue crossover with Michael Moorcock's character Elric of Melnibone. The following year, Marvel Comics introduced another series of Conan adaptations by Thomas in *Savage Tales*. *Conan the Barbarian King-Size* appeared in 1973, and it was followed over the years by such tides as *The Savage Sword of Conan*, *King Conan*, *Conan the Destroyer* and *The Conan Saga*.____In 1982 director John Milius, along with co-writer Oliver Stone, turned *Conan the Barbarian* into a multi-million dollar fantasy movie, with Austrian bodybuilder and former Mr Universe Arnold Schwarzenegger cast as the eponymous sword-wielding hero pitted against James Earl Jones' evil shape-changing sorcerer, Thulsa Doom. Two years later Schwarzenegger returned to the screen in *Conan the Destroyer* for veteran director Richard Fleischer. This time Sarah Douglas' treacherous Queen Taramis sent Conan and his companions on a quest for a magical key to unlock the secret of a mystical horn. Filmed on a lower budget in Mexico, this pulpy sequel was more faithful to the spirit of Howard's characters, probably because it was based on a story by comic-book writers Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway.____Robert E. Howard was not even credited on the 1992-93 half-hour children's cartoon series *Conan the Adventurer*, in which the brawny barbarian and his comrades set out to undo the spell of living stone cast upon Conan's family by driving the evil serpent men back into another dimension. German weight-lifter Ralph Moeller took over the role for the 1997-98 live-action television series *Conan*, produced by Brian Yuzna. The pilot film, *The Heart of the Elephant*, was loosely based on Howard's story 'The Tower of the Elephant' and featured a bizarre computer-created image of the late Richard Burton as the Cimmerian god Crom.____Even more unexpected was director Dan Ireland's little 1996 independent film *The Whole Wide World*, based on Novalyne Price Ellis' book *One Who Walked Alone*. Filmed on location in Texas, Rene Zellweger portrayed the young schoolteacher who befriended eccentric pulp magazine writer Robert E. Howard, played by Vincent D'Onofrio. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect film biography of Howard's final years.____Howard himself had already hinted in letters that he was planning to move away from fantasy fiction, and there has been much conjecture over the years that, had he lived, he would have made his name as a regional writer, with more mainstream stories or histories set in his native Southwest.____In his Foreword to the 1946 Arkham House collection of Howard's short fiction, *Skull-Face and Others*, editor August Derleth supports this view: 'The late Robert E. Howard was a writer of pulp fiction. He was also more than that. He had in him the promise of becoming an important American regionist, and to that end he had been assimilating the lore and legend, the history and culture patterns of his own corner of Texas.'____We shall never know how he may have developed as a writer. But if he had continued to work in the fantastic field, we can only speculate as to where Howard himself might have taken Conan. In his 1936 letter to P. Schuyler Miller he left behind a number of clues: 'He was, I think, king of Aquilonia for many

years, in a turbulent and unquiet reign, when the Hyborian civilization had reached its most magnificent high-tide, and every king had imperial ambitions. At first he fought on the defensive, but I am of the opinion that at last he was forced into wars of aggression as a matter of self-preservation. Whether he succeeded in conquering a world-wide empire, or perished in the attempt, I do not know. 'He travelled widely, not only before his kingship, but after he was king. He travelled to Khitai and Hyrkania, and to the even less known regions north of the latter and south of the former. He even visited a nameless continent in the western hemisphere, and roamed among the islands adjacent to it. How much of this roaming will get into print, I can not foretell with any accuracy.'___Tragically, because of Howard's suicide, none of it ever did.___As we approach the centenary of Robert E. Howard's birth, it is worth noting that these stories - often written for less than a cent per word and published in disposable magazines printed on cheap pulp paper - have remained with us over the decades. Today, through films, television and comic books, Howard's name is more widely known than it ever was during his lifetime. His most famous creation, Conan the Cimmerian, has outlived his creator and, with the exception of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan, is possibly the best-known character in modern fantasy fiction.___Towards the end of 2000, it was announced that Marvel Comics' Stan Lee had purchased the rights to Conan for \$4.3 million through the exchange of common shares in his Stan Lee Media group, and Wachowski brothers Larry and Andy (The Matrix, etc.) were involved in developing a new Conan movie for Warner Bros., with John Milius once again attached to write and direct.___But those who only know the barbarian through his media incarnations have not experienced the real Conan. At his best, Robert E. Howard could sweep the reader away on a red tide of bloodlust to lost cities, unexplored jungles and savage pirate galleons, where all a brave man needed was a sharp sword in his hand and a beautiful woman by his side to face whatever hideous horror or supernatural menace confronted him.___These, then, are the original tales of Conan, as fresh, atmospheric and vibrant today as when they were first published more than sixty years ago in the pages of Weird Tales and elsewhere.___As H. P. Lovecraft accurately observed: 'It is hard to describe precisely what made Mr Howard's stories stand out so sharply; but the real secret is that he himself is in every one of them ... He was greater than any profit-making policy he could adopt - for even when he outwardly made concessions to Mammon-guided editors and commercial critics, he had an internal force and sincerity which broke through the surface and put the imprint of his personality on everything he wrote. Before he concluded with it, it always took on some tinge of vitality and reality in spite of popular editorial policy - always drew something from his own experience and knowledge of life instead of from the sterile herbarium of desiccated pulpish standby. Not only did he excel in pictures of strife and slaughter, but he was almost alone in his ability to create real emotions of spectral fear and dread suspense. No author - even in the humblest fields - can truly excel unless he takes his work very seriously; and Mr Howard did just that even in cases where he consciously thought he did not.'___For the discerning reader of fantasy fiction, Robert E. Howard's talent and tragedy will continue to live on through these authentic adventures of his greatest creation, Conan the barbarian.___Stephen Jones___London, England___December 2000___575___

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