

The Curse of the Monolith

By L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter

1.

The sheer cliffs of dark stone closed about Conan the Cimmerian like the sides of a trap. HE did not like the way their jagged peaks loomed against the few faint stars, which glittered like the eyes of spiders down upon the small camp on the flat floor of the valley. Neither did he like the chill, uneasy wind that whistled across the stony heights and prowled about the campfire. It caused the flames to lean and flicker, sending monstrous black shadows writhing across the rough stone walls of the nearer valley side.

On the other side of the camp, colossal redwoods, which had been old when Atlantis sank beneath the waves eight thousand years before, rose amid thickets of bamboo and clumps of rhododendron. A small stream meandered out of the woods, murmured past the camp, and wandered off into the forest again. Overhead, a layer of haze or high fog drifted across the tops of the cliffs, drowning the light of the fainter stars and making the brighter ones seem to weep.

Something about this place, thought Conan, stank of fear and of death. HE could almost smell the acrid odor of terror on the breeze. The horses felt it too. They nickered plaintively, pawed the earth, and rolled white eyeballs at the dark beyond the circle of the fire. So was Conan, the barbarian warrior from the bleak hills of Cimmeria. Like his, their senses were more delicately turned to the aura of evil than were the senses of city-bred men like the Turanian troopers he had led into this deserted vale.

The soldiers sat about the fire, sharing the last of this night's ration of wine from goatskin bags. Some laughed and boasted of the amorous feats they would do in the silken bagnios of Aghrapur upon their return. Others, weary from a long day's hard ride, sat silently, staring at the fire and yawning. Soon they would settle down for the night, rolled in their heavy cloaks. With their heads pillowed on saddlebags, they would lie in a loose circle about the hissing fire, while two of their number stood guard with their powerful Hyrkanian bows strung and ready. They sensed nothing of the sinister force that hovered about the valley.

Standing with his back to the nearest of the giant redwoods, Conan wrapped his cloak more closely about him against the dank breeze from the heights. Although his troopers were well-built men of good size, he towered half a head over the tallest of them, while his enormous breadth of shoulder made them seem puny by comparison. His square-cut black mane escaped from below the edges of his spired, turban-wound helmet, and the deepset blue eyes in his dark, scarred face caught glints of red from the firelight.

Sunk in one of his fits of melancholy gloom, Conan silently cursed King Yildiz, the well-meaning but weak Turanian monarch who had sent him on this ill-omened mission. Over a year had passed since he had taken the oath of allegiance to the king of Turan. Six months before, he had been lucky enough to earn this king's favor; with the help of a fellow-mercenary, Juma the Kushite, he had rescued Yildiz's daughter Zosara from the mad

god-king of Meru. HE had brought the princess, more or less intact, to her affianced bridegroom, Khan Kujala of the nomadic Kuigar horde.

When Conan returned to Yildiz's glittering capital of Aghrapur, he had found the monarch generous enough in his gratitude. Both he and Juma had been raised to captain. But, whereas Juma had obtained a coveted post in the Royal Guard, Conan had been rewarded with yet another arduous, perilous mission. Now, as he recalled these events, he sourly contemplated the fruits of success.

Yildiz had entrusted the Cimmerian giant with a letter to King Shu of Kusan, a minor kingdom in western Khitai. At the head of forty veterans, Conan had accomplished the immense journey. He had traversed hundreds of leagues of bleak Hyrkanian steppe and skirted the foothills of the towering Talakma Mountains. He had threaded his way through the windy deserts and swampy jungles bordering the mysterious realm of Khitai, the easternmost land of which the men of the West had heard.

Arrived in Kusan at last, Conan had found the venerable and philosophical King Shu a splendid host. While Conan and his warriors were plied with exotic food and drink and furnished with willing concubines, the king and his advisers decided to accept King Yildiz's offer of a treaty of friendship and trade. So the wise old king had handed Conan a gorgeous scroll of gilded silk. Thereon were inscribed, in the writhing ideographs of Khitai and the gracefully slanted characters of Hyrkania, the formal replies and felicitations of the Khitan king.

Besides a silken purse full of Khitan gold, King Shu had also furnished Conan with a high noble of his court, to guide them as far as the western borders of Khitai. But Conan had not liked this guide, this Duke Feng.

The Khitan was a slim, dainty, foppish little man with a soft, lisping voice. He wore fantastical silken garments, unsuited to rugged riding and camping, and drenched his exquisite person in heavy perfume. He never soiled his soft, long-nailed hands with any of the camp chores, but instead kept his two servants busy day and night ministering to his comfort and dignity.

Conan looked down upon the Khitan's habits with a bard-bitten barbarian's manly contempt. The duke's slanting black eyes and purring voice reminded him of a cat, and he often told himself to watch this little princeling for treachery. On the other hand, he secretly envied the Khitan his exquisitely cultivated manners and easy charm. This fact led Conan to resent the duke even more; for, although his Turanian service had given Conan some slight polish, he was still at heart the blunt, boorish young barbarian. He would have to be careful of this sly little Duke Feng.

2.
"Do I disturb the profound meditations of the nobly born commander?", purred a soft voice.

Conan started and snatched at the hilt of his tulwar before he recognized the person of Duke Feng, wrapped to the lip in a voluminous cloak of pea-green velvet. Conan started to growl a contemptuous curse. Then, remembering his ambassadorial duties,

he turned the oath into a formal welcome that sounded unconvincing even in his own ears.

"Perhaps the princely captain is unable to sleep?" murmured Feng, appearing not to notice Conan's ungraciousness. Feng spoke fluent Hyrkanian. This was one reason for his having been dispatched to guide Conan's troop, for Conan's command of the singsong Khitan tongue was little more than a smattering. Feng continued:

"This person is so fortunate as to possess a sovereign remedy for sleeplessness. A gifted apothecary concocted it for me from an ancient recipe: a decoction of lily buds ground into cinnamon and spiced with poppy seeds..."

"No, nothing," growled Conan. "I thank you, Duke, but it's something about this accursed place. Some uncanny premonition keeps me wakeful when, after a long day's ride, I should be as weary as a stripling after his first night's bout of love."

The duke's features moved a trifle, as if he winced at Conan's crudity or was it merely a flicker of the firelight? In any case, he suavely replied, "I think I understand the misgivings of the excellent commander. Nor are such disquieting emotions unusual in this ah this legend-fraught valley. Many men have perished here."

"A battlefield, eh?" grunted Conan.

The duke's narrow shoulders twitched beneath the green cloak. "Nay, nothing like that, my heroic Western friend. This spot lies near the tomb of an ancient king of my people: King Hsia of Kusan. He caused his entire royal guard to be beheaded and their heads buried with him, that their spirits should continue to serve him in the next world. The common superstition, however, avers that the ghosts of these guardsmen march in review, up and down this valley." The soft voice dropped even lower. "Legend also states that a magnificent treasure of gold and precious jewels was buried with him; and this tale I believe to be true."

Conan pricked up his ears. "Gold and gems, eh? Has it ever been found, this treasure?"

The Khitan surveyed Conan for a moment with an oblique, contemplative gaze. Then, as if having reached some private decision, he replied, "No, Lord Conan; for the precise location of the trove is not known save to one man."

Conan's interest was quite visible now. "To whom?" he demanded bluntly.

The Khitan smiled. "To my unworthy self, of course."

"Crom and Erlik! If you've known where this loot was hidden, why haven't you dug it up ere now?"

"My people are haunted by superstitious fears of a curse laid upon the site of the old king's tomb, which is marked by a monolith of dark stone. Hence I have never been able to persuade anyone to assist me in seizing the treasure, whose hiding place I alone know."

"Why couldn't you do it all by yourself?"

Feng spread his small, long-nailed hands. "I needed a trustworthy assistant to guard my back against stealthy foe, human or animal, that might approach whilst I was rapt in contemplation of the booty. Moreover, a certain amount of digging and lifting and prying will be required. A gentleman like me lacks the thews for such crude, physical efforts.

"Now harken, gallant sir! This person led the honorable commander through this valley, not by happenstance but by design. When I heard that the Son of Heaven wished me to accompany the brave captain westward, I seized upon the proposal with alacrity. This commission came as a veritable gift from the divine officials in Heaven, for Your Lordship possesses the musculature of three ordinary men. And, being a Western-born foreigner, you naturally do not share the superstitious terrors of us of Kusan. Am I correct in my assumption?"

Conan grunted. "I fear neither god, man, nor devil, and least of all the ghost of a long-dead king. Speak on, Lord Feng."

The duke sidled closer, his voice dropping to a scarcely audible whisper. "Then, here is my plan. As I have stated, this person guided you hither because I thought you might be he whom I have sought. The task will be light for one of your strength, and my baggage includes tools for excavation. Let us go upon the instant, and within an hour we shall be richer than either of us has dreamed!"

Feng's seductive, purring whisper awoke the lust for loot in Conan's barbaric heart, but a residue of caution restrained the Cimmerian from immediate assent.

"Why not rouse a squad of troopers to aid us?" he grumbled. "Or your servants? Surely we shall need help in bringing the plunder back to camp!"

Feng shook his sleek head. "Not so, honorable ally! The treasure consists of two small golden caskets of virgin gold, each packed with exceedingly rare and precious gems. We can each carry the fortune of a principedom, and why share this treasure with others? Since the secret is mine alone, I am naturally entitled to half. Then, if you are so lavish as to divide your half amongst your forty warriors...well, that is for you to decide."

It took no more urging to persuade Conan to Duke Feng's scheme. The pay of King Yildiz's soldiers was meager and usually in arrears. Conan's recompense for his arduous Turanian service to date had been many empty words of honor and precious little hard coin.

"I go to fetch the digging implements," murmured Feng. "We should leave the camp separately, so as not to arouse suspicion. Whilst I unpack the utensils, you shall don your coat of mail and your arms."

Conan frowned. "Why should I need armor, just to dig up a chest?"

"Oh, excellent sir! There are many dangers in these hills. Here roam the terrible tiger, the fierce leopard, the churlish bear, and the irascible wild bull, not to mention wandering bands of primitive hunters. Since a Khitan gentleman is not trained in

the use of arms, your mighty self must be prepared to fight for two. Believe me, noble captain, I know whereof I speak!"

"Oh, all right," grumbled Conan.

"Excellent! I knew that so superior a mind as yours would see the force of my arguments. And now we part, to meet again at the foot of the valley at moonrise. That should occur about one double hour hence, which will give us ample time for our rendezvous."

3.

The night grew darker and the wind, colder. All the eery premonitions of danger, which Conan had experience since first entering this forsaken vale at sundown, returned in full force. As he walked silently beside the diminutive Khitan, he cast wary glances into the darkness. The steep rock walls on either side narrowed until there was hardly room to walk between the cliffside and the banks of the stream which gurgled out of the valley at their feet.

Behind them, a glow appeared in the misty sky where the heads of the cliffs thrust blackly up against the firmament. This glow grew stronger and became a pearly opalescence. The walls of the valley fell away on either hand, and the two men found themselves treading a grassy sward that spread out on both sides. The stream angled off to the right and, gurgling, curved out of sight between banks clustered with ferns.

As they issued from the valley, the half moon rose over the cliffs behind them. In the misty air, it looked as if the viewer were seeing it from under water. The wan, illusive light of this moon shone upon a small, rounded hill, which rose out of the sward directly before them. Beyond it, steep-sided, forest-crested hills stood up blackly in the watery moonlight.

As the moon cast a powdering of silver over the hill before them, Conan forgot his premonitions. For here rose the monolith of which Feng had spoken. It was a smooth, dully glistening shaft of dark stone, which rose from the top of the hill and soared up until it pierced the layer of mist that overhung the land. The top of the shaft appeared as a mere blur.

Here, then, was the tomb of the long-dead King Hsia, just as Feng had foretold. The treasure must be buried either directly beneath it or to one side. They would soon find out which.

With Feng's crowbar and shovel on his shoulder, Conan pushed forcefully through a clump of tough, elastic rhododendron bushes and started up the hill. HE paused to give his small companion a hand up. After a brief scramble, they gained the top of the slope.

Before them, the shaft rose from the center of thinly convex surface of the hilltop. The hill, thought Conan, was probably an artificial mound, such as were sometimes piled up over the remains of great chiefs in his own country. If the treasure were at the bottom of such a pile, it would take more than one night's digging to uncover it...

With a startled oath, Conan clutched at his shovel and crowbar. Some invisible force had seized upon them and pulled them toward

the shaft. HE leaned away from the shaft, his powerful muscles bulging under his mail shirt. Inch by inch, however, the force dragged him toward the monolith. When he saw that he would be drawn against the shaft willy-nilly, he let go of the tools, which flew to the stone. They struck it with a loud double clank and stuck fast to it.

But releasing the tools did not free Conan from the attraction of the monument, which now pulled on his mail shirt as powerfully as it had on the shovel and the crowbar. Staggering and cursing, Conan was slammed against the monolith with crushing force. His back was pinned to the shaft, as were his upper arms where the short sleeves of the mail shirt covered them. So was his head inside the spired Turanian helmet, and so was the scabbarded sword at his waist.

Conan struggled to tear himself free but found that he could not. It was as if unseen chains bound him securely to the column of dark stone.

"What devil's trick is this, you treacherous dog?" he ground out.

Smiling and imperturbable, Feng strolled up to where Conan stood pinned against the pillar. Seemingly impervious to the mysterious force, the Khitan took a silken scarf from one of the baggy sleeves of his silken coat. HE waited until Conan opened his mouth to bellow for help, then adroitly jammed a bunch of the silk into Conan's mouth. While Conan gagged and chewed on the cloth, the little man knotted the scarf securely around Conan's head. At last Conan stood, panting but silent, glaring venomously down into the courteous smile of the little duke.

"Forgive the ruse, O noble savage!" lisped Feng. "It was needful that this person concoct some tale to appeal to your primitive lust for gold, in order to allure you hither alone."

Conan's eyes blazed with volcanic fury as he hurled all the might of his powerful body against the invisible bonds that held him against the monolith. It did no good; he was helpless. Sweat trickled down his brow and soaked the cotton haqueton beneath his mail. He tried to shout, but only grunts and gurgles came forth.

"Since, my dear captain, your life approaches its predestined end," continued Feng, "it would be impolite of me not to explain my actions, so that your lowly spirit may journey to whatever hell the gods of the barbarians have prepared for it in full knowledge of the causes of your downfall. Know that the court of his amiable but foolish highness, the king of Kusan, is divided between two parties. One of these, that of the White Peacock, welcomes contact with the barbarians of the West. The other, that of the Golden Pheasant, abominates all association with those animals; and I, of course, am one of the selfless patriots of the Golden Pheasant. Willingly would I give my life to bring your so-called embassy to destruction, lest contact with your barbarous masters contaminate our pure culture and upset our divinely ordained social system.

"Happily, such an extreme measure seems unnecessary. For I have you, the leaser of his band of foreign devils, and there around your neck hangs the treaty the Son of Heaven signed with your uncouth heathen king."

The little duke pulled out from under Conan's mail shirt the ivory tube containing the documents. HE unclasped the chain that secured it around Conan's neck and tucked it into one of his voluminous sleeves, adding with a malicious smile, "As for the force that holds you prisoner, I will not attempt to explain its subtle nature to your childish wits. Suffice it to explain that the substance whereof this monolith was hewn has the curious property of attracting iron and steel with irresistible force. So fear not; it is no unholy magic that holds you captive."

Conan was little heartened by this news. He had once seen a conjuror in Aghrapur pick up nails with a piece of dark-red stone and supposed that the force that held him was of the same sort. But, since he had never heard of magnetism, it was all equally magic as far as he was concerned.

"Lest you entertain false hopes of rescue by your men," Feng went on, "I have thought of that, also. In these hills dwell the Jagas, a primitive headhunting tribe. Attracted by your campfire, they will assemble at the ends of the valley and rush your camp at dawn. It is their invariable procedure.

"By that time I shall, I hope, be far away. If they capture me, too well, a man must die some time, and I trust I shall do so with the dignity and decorum befitting one of my rank and culture. My head would make a delightful ornament in a Jaga hut, I am sure.

"And so, my good barbarian, farewell. You will forgive this person for turning his back upon you during your last moments. For your demise is a pity in a way, and I should not enjoy witnessing it. Had you had the advantages of a Khitan upbringing, you would have had an admirable servant say, a bodyguard for me. But things are as they are."

After a mocking bow of farewell, the Khitan withdrew to the lower slope of the hill. Conan wondered if the Duke's plan was to leave him trapped against the shaft until he perished of starvation and thirst. If his men marked his absence before dawn, they might look for him. But then, since he had stolen out of the camp without leaving word of his going, they would not know whether to be alarmed by his absence. If he could only get word to them, they would scour the countryside for him and make short work of the treacherous little duke. But how to get word?

Again he threw his massive strength against the force that held him crushed against the column, but to no avail. HE could move his lower legs and arms and even turn his head somewhat from side to side. But his body was firmly gripped by the iron mail that clothed it.

Now the moon brightened. Conan observed that, about his feet and elsewhere around the base of the monument, grisly remains of other victims were scattered. Human bones and teeth were heaped like old rubbish; he must have trodden upon them when the mysterious force pulled him up against the shaft.

In the stronger light, Conan was disquieted to see that these remains were peculiarly discolored. A closer look showed that the bones seemed to have been eaten away here and there, as if some corrosive fluid had dissolved their smooth surfaces to expose the spongy structure beneath.

He turned his head from side to side, seeking some means of escape. The words of the smooth-tongued Khitan seemed to be true, but now he could discern pieces of iron held against the curiously stained and discolored stone of the column by the invisible force. To his left he sighted the shovel, the crowbar, and the rusty bowl of a helmet, while on the other side a time-eaten dagger was stuck against the stone. Yet once more he hurled his strength against this impalpable force...

From below sounded an eery piping sound a mocking, maddening tune. Straining his eyes through the fickle moonlight, Conan saw that Feng had not left the scene after all. Instead, the duke was sitting on the grass on the side of the hill, near its base. HE had drawn a curious flute from his capacious garments and was playing upon it.

Through the shrill piping, a faint, squashy sound reached Conan's ears. It seemed to come from above. The muscles of Conan's bullneck stood out as he twisted his head to look upward; the spired Turanian helmet grated against the stone as he moved. Then the blood froze in his veins.

The mist that had obscured the top of the pylon was gone. The rising half moon shone on and through and amorphous thing, which squatted obscenely on the summit of the column. It was like a huge lump of quivering, semitranslucent jelly and it lived. Life throbbing, bloated life pulsed within it. The moonlight glistened wetly upon it as it beat like a huge, living heart.

4.

As Conan, frozen with horror, watched, the dweller on the top of the monolith sent a trickle of jelly groping down the shaft toward him. The slippery pseudopod slithered over the smooth surface of the stone. Conan began to understand the source of the stains that discolored the face of the monolith. The wind had changed, and a vagrant down-draft wafted a sickening stench to Conan's nostrils. Now he knew why the bones at the base of the shaft bore that oddly eaten appearance. With a dread that almost unmanned him, he understood that the jellylike thing exuded a digestive fluid, by means of which it consumed its prey. HE wondered how many men, in ages past had stood in his place, bound helplessly to the pillar and awaiting the searing caress of the abomination now descending toward him.

Perhaps Feng's weird piping summoned it, or perhaps the odor of living flesh called it to feast. Whatever the cause, it had begun a slow, inching progress down the side of the shaft toward his face. The wet jelly sucked and slobbered as it slithered slowly toward him.

Despair gave new strength to his cramped, tired muscles. He threw himself from side to side, striving with every last ounce of strength to break the grip of the mysterious force. To his surprise, he found that, in one of his lunges, he slid to one side, partway around the column.

So the grip that held him did not forbid all movement! This gave him food for thought, though he knew that he could not long thus elude the monster of living jelly.

Something prodded his mailed side. Looking down, he saw the

rust-eaten dagger he had glimpsed before. His movement sideways had brought the hilt of the weapon against his ribs.

His upper arm was still clamped against the stone by the sleeve of his mail shirt, but his forearm and hand were free. Could he bend his arm far enough to clasp the haft of the dagger?

He strained, inching his hand along the stone. The mail of his arm scraped slowly over the surface; sweat trickled into his eyes. Bit by bit, his straining arm moved toward the handle of the dagger. The taunting tune of Feng's flute sang maddeningly in his ears, while the ungodly stench of the slime-thing filled his nostrils.

His hand touched the dagger, and in an instant he held the hilt fast. But, as he strained it away from the shaft, the rust-eaten blade broke with a sharp ping. Rolling his eyes downward, he saw that about two thirds of the blade, from the tapering point back, had broken off and lay flat against the stone. The remaining third still projected from the hilt. Since there was now less iron in the dagger for the shaft to attract, Conan was able, by a muscle-bulging effort, to tear the stump of the weapon away from the shaft.

A glance showed him that, although most of the blade was lost to him, the stump still had a couple of apparently sharp edges. With his muscles quivering from the effort of holding the implement away from the stone, he brought one of these edges up against the leathern thong that bound the two halves of the mail shirt together. Carefully, he began to saw the tough rawhide with the rusty blade.

Every movement was agony. The torment of suspense grew unbearable. His hand, bent into an uncomfortable, twisted position, ached and grew numb. The ancient blade was notched, thin, and brittle; a hasty motion might break it, leaving him helpless. Stroke after stroke he sawed up and down, with exquisite caution. The stench of the creature grew stronger and the sucking sounds of its progress, louder.

The Conan felt the thong snap. The next instant, he hurled his full strength against the magnetic force that imprisoned him. The thong unraveled through the loopholes in the mail shirt, until one whole side of the shirt was open. His shoulder and half an arm came out through the opening.

The he felt a light blow on the head. The stench became overpowering, and his unseen assailant from above pushed this way and that against his helmet. Conan knew that a jellylike tendril had reached his helmet and was groping over its surface, seeking flesh. Any instant, the corrosive stuff would seep down over his face...

Frantically, he pulled his arm out of the sleeve of the unlaced side of the mail shirt. With his free hand, he unbuckled his sword belt and the chin strap of his helmet. Then he tore himself loose altogether from the deadly constriction of the mail, leaving his tulwar and his armor flattened against the stone.

He staggered free of the column and stood for an instant on trembling legs. The moonlit world swam before his eyes.

Glancing back, he saw that the jelly-beast had now engulfed his helmet. Baffled in its quest for flesh, it was sending more pseudopods down and outward, wavering and questing in the watery light.

Down the slope, the demoniac piping continued. Feng sat cross-legged on the grass of the slope, tweedling away on his flute as if absorbed in some inhuman ecstasy.

Conan ripped off and threw away the gag. He pounced like a striking leopard. He came down, clutching hands first, upon the little duke; the pair rolled down the rest of the slope in a tangle of silken robe and thrashing limbs. A blow to the side of the head subdued Feng's struggles. Conan groped into the Khitan's wide sleeves and tore out the ivory cylinder containing the documents.

Then Conan lurched back up the hill, dragging Feng after him. As he reached the level section around the base of the monolith, he heaved Feng into the air over his head. Seeing what was happening to him, the duke uttered one high, thin scream as Conan hurled him at the shaft. The Khitan struck the column with a thud and slid unconscious to the ground at its base. The blow was merciful, for the duke never felt the slimy touch of the haunter of the monolith as the glassy tentacles reached his face. For a moment, Conan grimly watched. Feng's features blurred as the rippling jelly slid over them. Then the flesh faded away, and the skull and teeth showed through in a ghastly grin. The abomination flushed pink as it fed.

5.

Conan strode back to camp on stiff legs. Behind him, like a giant's torch, the monolith stood against the sky, wrapped in smoky, scarlet flames.

It had been the work of moments only to strike fire into dry tinder with his flint and steel. He had watched with grim satisfaction as the oily surface of the slime-monster ignited and blazed as it squirmed in voiceless agony. Let them both burn, he thought: the half-digested corpse of that treacherous dog and his loathsome pet!

As Conan neared the camp, he saw that the last of his warriors had not yet retired. Instead, several stood staring curiously at the distant firelight. As he appeared, they turned upon him, crying out: "Where have you been, Captain? What is that blaze? Where is the duke?"

"Ho, you gaping oafs!" he roared as he strode into the firelight. "Wake the boys and saddle up to run for it. The Jaga headhunters caught us, and they'll be here any time. They got the duke, but I broke free. Khusro! Mulai! Hop to it, if you do not want your heads hung up in their devil-devil huts! And I hope to Crom you've left me some of that wine!"

THE END