

Xeethra

Clark Ashton Smith

Subtle and manifold are the nets of the Demon, who followeth his chosen from birth to death and from death to death, throughout many lives.

--The Testaments of Carnamagos

Long had the wasting summer pastured its suns, like fiery red stallions, on the dun hills that crouched before the Mykrasian Mountains in wild easternmost Cincor. The peak-fed torrents were become tenuous threads or far-sundered, fallen pools; the granite boulders were shaled by the heat; the bare earth was cracked and creviced; and the low, meager grasses were seared even to the roots.

So it occurred that the boy Xeethra, tending the black and piebald goats of his uncle Pornos, was obliged to follow his charges further each day on the combes and hilltops. In an afternoon of late summer he came to a deep, craggy valley which he had never before visited. Here a cool and shadowy tarn was watered by hidden

well-springs; and the ledgy slopes about the tarn were mantled with herbage and bushes that had not wholly lost their vernal greenness.

Surprised and enchanted, the young goatherd followed his capering flock into this sheltered paradise. There was small likelihood that the goats of Pornos would stray afield from such goodly pasturage; so Xeethra did not trouble himself to watch them any longer. Entranced by his surroundings, he began to explore the valley, after

quenching his thirst at the clear waters that sparkled like golden wine.

To him, the place seemed a veritable garden-pleasance. Forgetting the distance he had already come,

and the wrath of Pornos if the flock should return late for the milking, he wandered deeper among the winding crags that protected the valley. On every hand the rocks grew sterner and wilder; the valley straitened; and he stood presently at its end, where a rugged wall forbade further progress.

Feeling a vague disappointment, he was about to turn and retrace his wanderings. Then, in the base of the sheer wall, he perceived the mysterious yawning of a cavern. It seemed that the rock must have opened only a little while before his coming: for the lines of cleavage were clearly marked, and the cracks made in the surrounding surface were unclaimed by the moss that grew plentifully elsewhere. From the cavern's creviced lip there sprang a stunted tree, with its newly broken roots hanging in air; and the stubborn tap-root was in the rock at Xeethra's feet, where, it was plain, the tree had formerly stood.

Wondering and curious, the boy peered into the inviting gloom of the cavern, from which, unaccountably, a soft balmy air now began to blow. There were strange odors in the air, suggesting the pungency of temple incense, the languor and luxury of opiate blossoms. They disturbed the senses of Xeethra; and at the same time they seduced him with their promise of unbeholden marvellous things. Hesitating, he tried to remember certain legends that Pornos had once told him: legends that concerned such hidden caverns as the one on which he had stumbled. But it seemed that the tales had faded now from his mind, leaving only a dim sense of things that were perilous, forbidden and magical. He thought that the cavern was the portal of some undiscovered world--and the portal had opened to permit his entrance. Being of a nature both venturesome and visionary, he was undeterred by the fears that others might have felt in his place. Overpowered by a great curiosity, he soon entered the cave, carrying for a torch a dry, resinous bough that had fallen from the tree in the cliff.

Beyond the mouth he was swallowed by a rough-arched passage that pitched downward like the gorge of some monstrous dragon. The torch's flame blew back, flaring and smoking in the warm aromatic wind that strengthened from unknown depths. The cave steepened perilously; but Xeethra continued his exploration,

climbing down by the stair-like coigns and projections of the stone.

Like a dreamer in a dream, he was wholly absorbed by the mystery on which he had happened; and at no time did he recall his abandoned duty. He lost all reckoning of the time consumed in his descent. Then suddenly, his torch was extinguished by a hot gust that blew upon him like the expelled breath of some prankish demon.

Feeling the assailment of a black panic, he tottered in darkness and sought to secure his footing on the dangerous incline. But, ere he could relume the blown-out torch, he saw that the night around him was not complete, but was tempered by a wan, golden glimmering from the depths below. Forgetting his alarm in a new wonder, he descended toward the mysterious light.

At the bottom of the long incline, Xeethra passed through a low cavern-mouth and emerged into sun-bright radiance. Dazzled and bewildered, he thought for a moment that his subterranean wanderings had brought him back to the outer air in some unsuspected land lying among the Mykrasian hills. Yet surely the region before him was no part of summer-stricken Cincor: for he saw neither hills nor mountains nor the black sapphire heaven from which the aging but despotic sun glared down with implacable drouth on the kingdoms of Zothique.

He stood on the threshold of a fertile plain that lapsed illimitably into golden distance under the measureless arch of a golden vault. Far off, through the misty radiance, there was a dim towering of unidentifiable masses that might have been spires and domes and ramparts. A level meadow lay at his feet, covered with close-grown curling sward that had the greenness of verdigris; and the sward, at intervals, was studded with strange blossoms appearing to turn and move like living eyes. Near at hand, beyond the meadow, was an orchard-like grove of tall, amply spreading trees amid whose lush leafage he descried the burning of numberless dark-red fruits. The plain, to all seeming, was empty of human life; and no birds flew in the fiery air or perched on the laden boughs. There was no sound other than the sighing of leaves: a sound like the hissing of many small hidden serpents.

To the boy from the parched hill-country, this realm was an Eden of untasted delights. But, for a little while, he was stayed by the strangeness of it all, and by the sense of weird and preternatural vitality which informed the whole landscape. Flakes of fire appeared to descend and melt in the rippling air; the grasses coiled with verminous writhings; the flowery eyes returned his regard intently; the trees palpitated as if a sanguine ichor flowed within them in lieu of sap; and the undernote of adder-like hissings amid the foliage grew louder and sharper.

Xeethra, however, was deterred only by the thought that a region so fair and fertile must belong to some jealous owner who would resent his intrusion. He scanned the unpeopled plain with much circumspection. Then, deeming himself secure from observation, he yielded to the craving that had been roused within him by the red,

luxuriant fruit.

The turf was elastic beneath him, like a living substance, as he ran forward to the nearest trees. Bowed with their shining globes, the branches drooped around him. He plucked several of the largest fruits and stored them thriftily in the bosom of his threadbare tunic. Then, unable to resist his appetite any longer, he began to devour one of the fruits. The rind broke easily under his teeth, and it seemed that a royal wine, sweet and puissant, was poured into his mouth from an overbrimming cup. He felt in his throat and bosom a swift warmth that almost suffocated him; and a strange fever sang in his ears and wildered his senses. It passed quickly, and he was startled from his bemusement by the sound of voices falling as if from an airy height.

He knew instantly that the voices were not those of men. They filled his ears with a rolling as of baleful drums, heavy with ominous echoes; yet it seemed that they spoke in articulate words, albeit of a strange language. Looking up between the thick boughs, he beheld a sight that inspired him with terror. Two beings of colossean stature, tall as the watchtowers of the mountain people, stood waist-high above the near treetops. It was as if they had appeared by sorcery from the green ground or the gold heavens: for surely the clumps of vegetation, dwarfed into bushes by their bulk, could never have concealed them from Xeethra's discernment.

The figures were clad in black armor, lusterless and gloomy, such as demons might wear in the service of Thasaidon, lord of the bottomless underworlds. Xeethra felt sure that they had seen him; and perhaps their unintelligible converse concerned his presence. He trembled, thinking now that he had trespassed on the gardens of genii. Peering fearfully from his covert, he could discern no features beneath the frontlets of the dark helms that were bowed toward him: but eye-like spots of yellowish-red fire, restless as marsh-lights, shifted to and from in void shadow where the faces should have been.

It seemed to Xeethra that the rich foliage could afford no shelter from the scrutiny of these beings, the guardians of the land on which he had so rashly intruded. He was overwhelmed by a consciousness of guilt: the sibilant leaves, the drum-like voices of the giants, the eye-shaped flowers--all appeared to accuse him of trespass and thievery. At the same time he was perplexed by a queer and unwonted vagueness in regard to his own identity: somehow it was not Xeethra the goatherd... but another... who had found the bright garden-realm and had eaten the blood-dark fruit. This alien self was without name or formulable memory; but there was a flickering of confused lights, a murmur of indistinguishable voices, amid the stirred shadows of his mind. Again he felt the weird warmth, the swift-mounting fever, that had followed the devouring of the fruit.

From all this, he was aroused by a livid flash of light that clove downward toward him across the branches. Whether a bolt of levin had issued from the clear vault, or whether one of the armored beings had brandished a great sword, he was never quite sure afterwards. The light seared his vision, he recoiled in uncontrollable fright,

and found himself running, half-blind, across the open turf. Through whirling bolts of color he saw before him, in a sheer, topless cliff, the cavern-mouth through which he had come. Behind him he heard a long rumbling as of summer thunder... or the laughter of colossi.

Without pausing to retrieve the still-burning brand he had left at the entrance, Xeethra plunged incontinently into the dark cave. Through Stygian murk he managed to grope his way upward on the perilous incline. Reeling, stumbling, bruising himself at every turn, he came at last to the outer exit, in the hidden valley behind the hills of

Cincor.

To his consternation, twilight had fallen during his absence in the world beyond the cave. Stars crowded above the grim crags that walled the valley; and the skies of burnt-out purple were gored by the sharp horn of an ivory moon. Still fearing the pursuit of the giant guardians, and apprehending also the wrath of his uncle Pornos,

Xeethra hastened back to the little tarn, collected his flock, and drove it homeward through the long, gloomy miles.

During that journey, it seemed that a fever burned and died within him at intervals, bringing strange fancies. He forgot his fear of Pornos, forgot, indeed, that he was Xeethra, the humble and disregarded goatherd. He was returning to another abode than the squalid hut of Pornos, built of clay and brushwood. In a high-domed

city, gates of burnished metal would open for him, and fiery-colored banners would stream on the perfumed air; and silver trumpets and the voices of blonde odalisques and black chamberlains would greet him as king in a thousand-columned hall. The ancient pomp of royalty, familiar as air and light, would surround him, and he, the King Amero, who had newly come to the throne, would rule as his fathers had ruled over all the kingdom of Calyz by the orient sea. Into his capital, on shaggy camels, the fierce southern tribesmen would bring a levy of date-wine and desert sapphires; and galleys from isles beyond the morning would burden his wharves with their semi-annual tribute of spices and strange-dyed fabrics...

Surging and fading like pictures of delirium but lucid as daily memories, the madness came and went; and once again he was the nephew of Pornos, returning belated with the flock.

Like a downward-thrusting blade, the red moon had fixed itself in the somber hills when Xeethra reached the rough wooden pen in which Pornos kept his goats. Even as Xeethra had expected, the old man was waiting at the gate, bearing in one hand a clay lantern and in the other a staff of briarwood. He began to curse the boy with half-senile vehemence, waving the staff, and threatening to beat him for his tardiness.

Xeethra did not flinch before the staff. Again, in his fancy, he was Amero, the young king of Calyz. Bewildered and astonished, he saw before him by the light of the shaken lantern a foul and rancid-smelling ancient whom he could not remember. Hardly could he understand the speech of Pornos; the man's anger puzzled but did

not frighten him; and his nostrils, as if accustomed only to delicate perfumes, were offended by the goatish stench. As if for the first time, he heard the bleating of the tired flock, and gazed in wild surprise at the wattled pen and the hut beyond.

"Is it for this," cried Pornos, "that I have reared my sister's orphan at great expense? Accursed

moon-calf! Thankless whelp! If you have lost a milch-goat or a single kid, I shall flay you from thigh to shoulder."

Deeming that the silence of the youth was due to mere obstinacy, Pornos began to beat him with the staff. At the first blow, the bright cloud lifted from Xeethra's mind. Dodging the briarwood with agility, he tried to tell Pornos of the new pasture he had found among the hills. At this the old man suspended his blows, and Xeethra went on to tell of the strange cave that had conducted him to an unguessed garden-land. To support his story he reached within his tunic for the blood-red apples he had stolen; but, to his confoundment, the fruits were gone, and he knew not whether he had lost them in the dark or whether, perhaps, they had vanished by virtue of some indwelling necromancy.

Pornos, interrupting the boy with frequent scoldings, heard him at first with open unbelief. But he grew silent as the youth went on, and when the story was done, he cried out in a trembling voice:

"Illwas this day, for you have wandered among enchantments. Verily, there in no tarn such as you have described amid the hills; nor, at this season, has any herder found such pasturage. These things were illusions, designed to lead you astray; and the cave, I wot, was no honest cave but an entrance into hell. I have heard my fathers tell that the gardens of Thasaidon, king of the seven underworlds, lie near to the earth's surface in this region; and caves have opened ere this, like a portal, and the sons of men, trespassing unaware on the gardens, have been tempted by the fruit and eaten it. But madness comes thereof and much sorrow and long damnation: for the Demon, they say, forgetting not one stolen apple, will exact his price in the end. Woe! woe! the goat-milk will be soured for a whole moon by the grass of such wizard pasture; and, after all the food and care you have cost me, I must find another stripling to ward the flocks."

Once more, as he listened, the burning cloud returned upon Xeethra.

"Old man, I know you not," he said perplexedly. Then, using soft words of a courtly speech but half-intelligible to Pornos: "It would seem that I have gone astray. Prithee, where lies the kingdom of Calyz? I am king thereof, being newly crowned in the high city of Shathair, over which my fathers have ruled for a thousand years."

"Ai! Ai!" wailed Pornos. "The boy is daft. These notions have come through the eating of the Demon's apple. Cease your maundering, and help me to milk the goats. You are none other than the child of my sister Askli, who was delivered these nineteen years ago after her husband, Outhoth, had died of a dysentery. Askli lived

not long, and I, Pornos, have reared you as a son, and the goats have mothered you."

"I must find my kingdom," persisted Xeethra. "I am lost in darkness, amid uncouth things, and how I have wandered here I cannot remember. Old man, I would have you give me food and lodging for the night. In the dawn I shall journey toward Shathair, by the orient main."

Pornos, shaking and muttering, lifted his clay lantern to the boy's face. It seemed that a stranger stood before him, in whose wide and wondering eyes the flame of golden lamps was somehow reflected. There was no wildness in Xeethra's demeanor, but merely a sort of gentle pride and remoteness; and he wore his threadbare tunic with a strange grace. Surely, however, he was demented; for his manner and speech were past understanding. Pornos, mumbling under his breath, but no longer urging the boy to assist him, turned to the milking...

* * * * *

Xeethra woke betimes in the white dawn, and peered with amazement at the mud-plastered walls of the hovel in which he had dwelt since birth. All was alien and baffling to him; and especially was he troubled by his rough garments and by the sun-swart tawnyness of his skin: for such were hardly proper to the young King Amero, whom he believed himself to be. His circumstances were wholly inexplicable; and he felt an urgency to depart at once on his homeward journey.

He rose quietly from the litter of dry grasses that had served him for a bed. Pornos, lying in a corner, still slept the sleep of age and senescence; and Xeethra was careful not to awaken him. He was both puzzled and repelled by this unsavory ancient, who had fed him on the previous evening with coarse millet-bread and the strong milk and cheese of goats, and had given him the hospitality of a fetid hut. He had paid little heed to the mumblings and objurgations of Pornos; but it was plain that the old man doubted his claims to royal rank, and, moreover, was possessed of peculiar delusions regarding his identity.

Leaving the hovel, Xeethra followed an eastward-winding footpath amid the stony hills. He knew not whither the path would lead: but reasoned that Calyz, being the easternmost realm of the continent Zothique, was situated somewhere below the rising sun. Before him, in vision, the verdant vales of his kingdom hovered like a fair mirage, and the swelling domes of Shathair were as morning cumuli piled in the orient. These things, he deemed, were memories of yesterday. He could not recall the circumstances of his departure and his absence; but surely the land over which he ruled was not remote.

The path turned among lessening ridges, and Xeethra came to the small village of Cith, to whose inhabitants he was known. The place was alien to him now, seeming no more than a cirque of filthy hovels that reeked and festered under the sun. The people gathered about him, calling him by name, and staring and laughing oafishly.

when he inquired the road to Calyz. No one, it appeared, had ever heard of this kingdom or of the city of Shathair. Noting a strangeness in Xeethra's demeanor, and deeming that his queries were those of a madman, the people began to mock him. Children pelted him with dry clods and pebbles; and thus he was driven from Cith,

following an eastern road that ran from Cincor into the neighboring lowlands of the country of Zhel.

Sustained only by the vision of his lost kingdom, the youth wandered for many moons throughout Zothique. People derided him when he spoke of his kingship and made inquiry concerning Calyz; but many, thinking madness a sacred thing, offered him shelter and sustenance. Amid the far-stretching fruitful vineyards of Zhel, and

into Istanam of the myriad cities; over the high passes of Ymorth, where snow tarried at the autumn's beginning; and across the salt-pale desert of Dhir, Xeethra followed that bright imperial dream which had now become his only memory. Always eastward he went, travelling sometimes with caravans whose members hoped that a madman's company would bring them good fortune; but oftener he went as a solitary wayfarer.

At whiles, for a brief space, his dream deserted him, and he was only the simple goatherd, lost in foreign realms, and homesick for the barren hills of Cincor. Then, once more, he remembered his kingship, and the opulent gardens of Shathair and the proud palaces, and the names and faces of them that had served him following

the death of his father, King Eldamaque, and his own succession to the throne.

* * * * *

At midwinter, in the far city of Sha-Karag, Xeethra met certain sellers of amulets from Ustaim, who smiled oddly when he asked if they could direct him to Calyz. Winking among themselves when he spoke of his royal rank, the merchants told him that Calyz was situated several hundred leagues beyond Sha-Karag, below the orient sun.

"Hail, O King," they said with mock ceremony. "Long and merrily may you reign in Shathair."

Very joyful was Xeethra, hearing word of his lost kingdom for the first time, and knowing now that it was more than a dream or a figment of madness. Tarrying no longer in Sha-Karag, he journeyed on with all possible haste...

When the first moon of spring was a frail crescent at eve, he knew that he neared his destination. For Canopus burned high in the eastern heavens, mounting gloriously amid the smaller stars even as he had once seen it from his palace-terrace in Shathair.

His heart leapt with the gladness of homecoming; but much he marvelled at the wildness and sterility of the region through which he passed. It seemed that there were no travellers coming and going from Calyz; and he met only a few nomads, who fled at his approach like the creatures of the waste. The highway was overgrown

with grasses and cacti, and was rutted only by the winter rains. Beside it, anon, he came to a stone terminus carved in the form of a rampant lion, that had marked the western boundary of Calyz. The lion's features had crumbled away, and his paws and body were lichened, and it seemed that long ages of desolation had gone

over him. A chill dismay was born in Xeethra's heart: for only yesteryear, if his memory served him rightly, he had ridden past the lion with his father Eldamaque, hunting hyenas, and had remarked then the newness of the carving.

Now, from the high ridge of the border, he gazed down upon Calyz, which had lain like a long verdant scroll beside the sea. To his wonderment and consternation, the wide fields were sere as if with autumn; the rivers were thin threads that wasted themselves in sand; the hills were gaunt as the ribs of unceremented mummies; and there was no greenery other than the scant herbage which a desert bears in spring. Far off, by the purple main, he thought that he beheld the shining of the marble domes of Shathair; and, fearing that some blight of hostile sorcery had fallen upon his kingdom, he hastened toward the city.

Everywhere, as he wandered heartsick through the vernal day, he found that the desert had established its empire. Void were the fields, unpeopled the villages. The cots had tumbled into midden-like heaps of ruin; and it seemed that a thousand seasons of drouth had withered the fruitful orchards, leaving only a few black and decaying stumps.

In the late afternoon he entered Shathair, which had been the white mistress of the orient sea. The streets and the harbor were alike empty, and silence sat on the broken housetops and the ruining walls. The great bronze obelisks were greened with antiquity; the massy marmorean temples of the gods of Calyz leaned and slanted to their fall.

Tardily, as one who fears to confirm an expected thing, Xeethra came to the palace of the monarchs. Not as he recalled it, a glory of soaring marble half veiled by flowering almonds and trees of spice and high-pulsing fountains, but in stark dilapidation amid blasted gardens, the palace awaited him, while the brief, illusory rose

of sunset faded upon its dome, leaving them wan as mausoleums.

How long the place had lain desolate, he could not know. Confusion filled him, and he was whelmed by utter loss and despair. It seemed that none remained to greet him amid the ruins; but, nearing the portals of the west wing, he saw, as it were, a fluttering of shadows that appeared to detach themselves from the gloom beneath the portico; and certain dubious beings, clothed in rotten tatter, came sidling and crawling before him on the cracked pavement. Pieces of their raiment dropped from them as they moved; and about them was an unnamed horror of filth, of squalor and disease. When they neared him, Xeethra saw that most of them were lacking in some member or feature, and that all were marked by the gnawing of leprosy.

His gorge rose within him, and he could not speak. But the lepers hailed him with hoarse cries and hollow croakings, as if deeming him another outcast who had come to join them in their abode amid the ruins.

"Who are ye that dwell in my palace of Shathair?" he inquired at length. "Behold! I am King Amero, the son of Eldamaque, and I have returned from a far land to resume the throne of Calyz."

At this, a loathsome cackling and tittering arose among the lepers. "We alone are the kings of Calyz," one of them told the youth. "The land has been a desert for centuries, and the city of Shathair had long lain unpeopled save by such as we, who were driven out from other places. Young man, you are welcome to share the realm with us: for another king, more or less, is a small matter here."

Then, with obscene cachinnations, the lepers jeered at Xeethra and derided him; and he, standing amid the dark fragments of his dream, could find no words to answer them. However, one of the oldest lepers, well-nigh limbless and faceless, shared not in the mirth of his fellows, but seemed to ponder and reflect; and he said

at last to Xeethra, in a voice issuing thickly from the black pit of his gaping mouth:

"I have heard something of the history of Calyz, and the names of Amero and Eldamaque are familiar to me. In bygone ages certain of the rulers were named thus; but I know not which of them was the son and which the father. Haply both are now entombed with the rest of their dynasty, in the deep-lying vaults beneath the palace."

Now, in the greying twilight, other lepers emerged from the shadowy ruin and gathered about Xeethra.

Hearing that he laid claim to the kingship of the desert realm, certain of their number went away and returned presently, bearing vessels filled with rank water and mouldy victuals, which they proffered to Xeethra, bowing low with a mummery as of chamberlains serving a monarch.

Xeethra turned from them in loathing, though he was famished and athirst. He fled through the ashen gardens, among the dry fountain-mouths and dusty plots. Behind him he heard the hideous mirth of the lepers; but the sound grew fainter, and it seemed that they did not follow him. Rounding the vast palace in his flight, he met no

more of these creatures. The portals of the south wing and the east wing were dark and empty, but he did not care to enter them, knowing that desolation and things worse than desolation were the sole tenants.

Wholly distraught and despairing, he came to the eastern wing and paused in the gloom. Dully, and with a sense of dream-like estrangement, he became aware that he stood on that very terrace above the sea, which he had remembered so often during his journey. Bare were the ancient flower-beds; the trees had rotted away in their sunken basins; and the great flags of the pavement were runneled and broken. But the veils of twilight were tender upon the ruin; and the sea sighed as of yore under a purple shrouding; and the mighty star Canopus climbed in the east, with the lesser stars still faint around him.

Bitter was the heart of Xeethra, thinking himself a dreamer beguiled by some idle dream. He shrank from the high splendor of Canopus, as if from a flame too bright to bear; but, ere he could turn away, it seemed that a column of shadow, darker than the night and thicker than any cloud, rose upward before him from the terrace and blotted out the effulgent star. Out of the solid stone the shadow grew, towering tall and colossal; and it took on the outlines of a mailed warrior; and it seemed that the warrior looked down upon Xeethra from a great height with eyes that shone and shifted like fireballs in the darkness of his face under the lowering helmet.

Confusedly, as one who recalls an old dream, Xeethra remembered a boy who had herded goats upon summer-stricken hills; and who, one day, had found a cavern that opened portal-like on a garden-land of strangeness and marvel. Wandering there, the boy had eaten a blood-dark fruit and had fled in a terror before the black-armored giants who warded the garden. Again he was that boy; and still he was the King Amero, who had sought for his lost realm through many regions; and, finding it in the end, had found only the abomination of desolation.

Now, as the trepidation of the goatherd, guilty of theft and trespass, warred in his soul with the pride of the king, he heard a voice that rolled through the heavens like thunder from a high cloud in the spring night:

"I am the emissary of Thasaidon, who sends me in due course to all who have passed the nether portals and tasted the fruit of his garden. No man, having eaten the fruit, shall remain thereafter as he was before; but to some the fruit brings oblivion, and to others, memory. Know, then, that in another birth, ages ago, you were

indeed the young King Amero. The memory, being strong upon you, has effaced the remembrance of your present life, and has driven you forth to seek your ancient kingdom."

"If this be true, then doubly am I bereft," said Xeethra, bowing sorrowfully before the shadow. "For, being Amero, I am throneless and realmless; and, being Xeethra, I cannot forget my former royalty and regain the content which I knew as a simple goatherd."

"Harken, for there is another way," said the shadow, its voice muted like the murmur of a far ocean. "Thasaidon is the master of all sorceries, and a giver of magic gifts to those who serve him and acknowledge him as their lord. Pledge your allegiance, promise your soul to him; and in fee thereof, the Demon will surely reward you. If it be your wish, he can wake again the buried past with his necromancy. Again, as King Amero, you shall reign over Calyz; and all things shall be as they were in the perished years; and the dead faces and the fields now desert shall bloom again."

"I accept the bond," said Xeethra. "I plight my fealty to Thasaidon, and I promise my soul to him if he, in return, will give me back my kingdom."

"There is more to be said," resumed the shadow. "Not wholly have you remembered your other life, but merely those years that correspond to your present youth. Living again as Amero, perhaps you will regret your royalty in time; and if such regret should overcome you, leading you to forget a monarch's duty, then the whole necromancy shall end and vanish like vapor."

"So be it," said Xeethra. "This, too, I accept as part of the bargain."

When the words ended, he beheld no longer the shadow towering against Canopus. The star flamed with a pristine splendor, as if no cloud had ever dimmed it; and without sense of change or transition, he who watched the star was none other than King Amero; and the goatherd Xeethra, and the emissary, and the pledge given

to Thasaidon, were as things that had never been. The ruin that had come upon Shathair was no more than the dream of some mad prophet; for in the nostrils of Amero the perfume of languorous flowers mingled with salt sea-balsams; and in his ears the grave murmur of ocean was pierced by the amorous plaint of lyres and a shrill laughter of slave-girls from the palace behind him. He heard the myriad noises of the nocturnal city, where his people feasted and made jubilee; and, turning from the star with a mystic

pain and an obscure joy in his heart, Amero beheld the effulgent portals and windows of his father's house, and the far-mounting light from

a thousand flambeaux that paled the stars as they passed over Shathair.

* * * * *

It is written in the old chronicles that King Amero reigned for many prosperous years. Peace and abundance were upon all the realm of Calyz; the drouth came not from the desert, nor violent gales from the main; and tribute was sent at the ordained seasons to Amero from the subject isles and outlying lands. And Amero was well content, dwelling superbly in rich-arrased halls, feasting and drinking royally, and hearing the praise of his lute-players and his chamberlains and lemans.

When his life was little past the meridian years, there came at whiles to Amero something of that satiety which lies in wait for the minions of fortune. At such times he turned from the cloying pleasures of the court and found delight in blossoms and leaves and the verses of olden poets. Thus was satiety held at bay; and, since the duties of the realm rested lightly upon him, Amero still found his kingship a goodly thing.

Then, in a latter autumn, it seemed that the stars looked disastrously on Calyz. Murrain and blight and pestilence rode abroad as if on the wings of unseen dragons. The coast of the kingdom was beset and sorely harried by pirate galleys. Upon the west, the caravans coming and going through Calyz were assailed by redoubtable

bands of robbers; and certain fierce desert peoples made war on the villages lying near to the southern border. The land was filled with turmoil and death, with lamentations and many miseries.

Deep was Amero's concern, hearing the distressful complaints that were brought before him daily. Being but little skilled in kingcraft, and wholly untried by the ordeals of dominion, he sought counsel of his courtlings but was ill advised by them. The troubles of the realm multiplied upon him; uncurbed by authority, the wild peoples of the waste grew bolder, and the pirates gathered like vultures of the sea. Famine and drouth divided his realm with the plague; and it seemed to Amero, in his sore perplexity, that such matters were beyond all medication; and his crown was become a too onerous burden.

Striving to forget his own impotence and the woeful plight of his kingdom, he gave himself to long nights of debauch. But the wine refused its oblivion, and love had now forfeited its rapture. He sought other divertissements, calling before him strange makers and mummers and buffoons, and assembling outlandish singers and the players of uncouth instruments. Daily he made proclamations of a high reward to any that could bemuse him from his cares.

Wild songs and sorcerous ballads of yore were sung to him by immortal minstrels; the black girls of the north, with amber-dappled limbs, danced before him their weird lascivious measures; the blowers of the horns of chimeras played a mad and secret tune; and savage drummers pounded a troublous music on drums made

from the skin of cannibals; while men clothed with the scales and pelts of half-mythic monsters ramped or crawled grotesquely through the halls of the palace. But all these were vain to beguile the king from his grievous musings.

One afternoon, as he sat heavily in his hall of audience, there came to him a player of pipes who was clad in tattered homespun. The eyes of the man were bright as newly stirred embers, and his face was burned to a cindery blackness, as if by the ardor of outland suns. Hailing Amero with small servility, he announced himself as

a goatherd who had come to Shathair from a region of valleys and mountains lying sequestered beyond the bourn of sunset.

"O King, I know the melodies of oblivion," he said, "and I would play for you, though I desire not the reward you have offered. If haply I succeed in diverting, I shall take my own guerdon in due time."

"Play, then," said Amero, feeling a faint interest rise within him at the bold speech of the piper.

Forthwith, on his pipes of reed, the black goatherd began a music that was like the falling and rippling of water in quiet vales, and the passing of wind over lonely hilltops. Subtly the pipes told of freedom and peace and forgetfulness lying beyond the sevenfold purple of outland horizons. Dulcetly they sang of a place where the

years came not with an iron trampling, but were soft of tread as a zephyr shod with flower petals. There the world's turmoil and troubling were lost upon measureless leagues of silence, and the burdens of empire were blown away like thistledown. There the goatherd, tending his flock on solitary fells, was possessed of tranquillity

sweeter than the power of monarchs.

As he listened to the piper, a sorcery crept upon the mind of Amero. The weariness of kingship, the cares and perplexities, were as dream-bubbles lapsing in some Lethean tide. He beheld before him, in sun-bright verdure and stillness, the enchanted vales evoked by the music; and he himself was the goatherd, following grassy

paths, or lying oblivious of the vulture hours by the margin of lulled waters.

Hardly he knew that the low piping had ceased. But the vision darkened, and he who had dreamt of a goatherd's peace was again a troubled king.

"Play on!" he cried to the black piper. "Name your own guerdon--and play."

The eyes of the goatherd burned like embers in a dark place at evening. "Not till the passing of ages and the falling of kingdoms shall I require of you my reward," he said enigmatically. "However, I shall play for you once more."

So, through the afternoon, King Amero was beguiled by that sorcerous piping which told ever of a far land of ease and forgetfulness. With each playing it seemed that the spell grew stronger upon him; and more and more was his royalty a hateful thing; and the very grandeur of his palace oppressed and stifled him. No longer

could he endure the heavily jewelled yoke of duty; and madly he envied the carefree lot of the goatherd.

At twilight he dismissed the ministrants who attended him, and held speech alone with the piper.

"Lead me to this land of yours," he said, "where I may dwell as a simple herder."

Clad in mufti, so that his people might not recognise him, the king stole from the palace through an unguarded postern, accompanied by the piper. Night, like a formless monster with the crescent moon for its lowered horn, was crouching beyond the town; but in the streets the shadows were thrust back by a flaming of myriad cressets. Amero and his guide were unchallenged as they went toward the outer darkness. And the king repented not his forsaken throne: though he saw in the city a continual passing of biers laden with the victims of the plague; and faces gaunt with famine rose up from the shadows as if to accuse him of recreancy. These he heeded not: for his eyes were filled with the dream of a green silent valley, in a land lost beyond the turbid flowing of time with its wreckage and tumult.

Now, as Amero followed the black piper, there descended upon him a sudden dimness; and he faltered in weird doubt and bewilderment. The street-lights flickered before him, and swiftly they expired in the gloom. The loud murmuring of the city fell away in a vast silence; and, like the shifting of some disordered

dream, it seemed that the tall houses crumbled stiffly and were gone even as shadows, and the stars shone over broken walls. Confusion filled the thoughts and the sense of Amero; and in his heart was a black chill of desolation; and he seemed to himself as one who had known the lapse of long empty years, and the loss of high splendor; and who stood now amid the extremity of age and decay. In his nostrils was a dry mustiness such as the night draws from olden ruin; and it came to him, as a thing foreknown and now remembered obscurely, that the desert was lord in his proud capital of Shathair.

"Where have you led me?" cried Amero to the piper.

For all reply, he heard a laughter that was like the peal of derisive thunder. The muffled shape of the goatherd towered colossally in the gloom, changing, growing, till its outlines were transformed to those of a giant warrior in sable armor. Strange memories thronged the mind of Amero, and he seemed to recall darkly something of

another life... Somehow, somewhere, for a time, he had been the goatherd of his dreams, content and forgetful... somehow, somewhere, he had entered a strange bright garden and had eaten a blood-dark fruit...

Then, in a flaring as of infernal levin, he remembered all, and knew the might shadow that towered above him like a Terminus reared in hell. Beneath his feet was the cracked pavement of the seaward terrace; and the stars above the emissary were those that precede Canopus; but Canopus himself was blotted out by the Demon's shoulder. Somewhere in the dusty darkness, a leper laughed and coughed thickly, prowling about the ruined palace in which had once dwelt the kings of Calyz. All things were even as they had been before the making of that bargain through which the perished kingdom had been raised up by the powers of hell.

Anguish choked the heart of Xeethra as if with the ashes of burnt-out pyres and the shards of heaped ruin. Subtly and manifoldly had the Demon tempted him to his loss. Whether these things had been dream or necromancy or verity he knew not with sureness; nor whether they had happened once or had happened often. In the end there was only dust and dearth; and he, the doubly accursed, must remember and repent forevermore all that he had forfeited.

He cried out to the emissary: "I have lost the bargain that I made with Thasaidon. Take now my soul and bear it before him where he sits aloft on his throne of ever-burning brass; for I would fulfil my bond to the uttermost."

"There is no need to take your soul," said the emissary, with an ominous rumble as of departing storm in the desolate night. "Remain here with the lepers, or return to Pornos and his goats, as you will: it matters little. At all times and in all places your soul shall be part of the dark empire of Thasaidon."

