

Cursed be the City

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Notes

This is the tale they tell, O King: that ere the royal banners were lifted upon the tall towers of Chaldean Ur, before the Winged Pharaohs reigned in secret Aegyptus, there were mighty empires far to the east. There in that vast desert known as the Cradle of Mankind—aye, even in the heart of the measureless Gobi—great wars were fought and high palaces thrust their minarets up to the purple Asian sky. But this, O King, was long ago, beyond the memory of the oldest sage; the splendor of Imperial Gobi lives now only in the dreams of minstrels and poets. ...

The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned.

CHAPTER I

The Gates of War

IN THE gray light of the false dawn the prophet had climbed to the outer wall of Sardopolis, his beard streaming in the chill wind. Before him, stretching across the broad plain, were the gay tents and pavilions of the besieging army, emblazoned with the scarlet symbol of the wyvern, the winged dragon beneath which King Cyaxares of the north waged his wars.

Already soldiers were grouped about the catapults and scaling-towers, and a knot of them gathered beneath the wall where the prophet stood. Mocking, rough taunts were voices, but for a time the white-bearded oldster paid no heed to the gibes. His sunken eyes, beneath their snowy penthouse brows, dwelt on the far distance, where a forest swept up into the mountain slopes and faded into blue haze.

His voice came, thin piercing. "Wo, wo unto Sardopolis! Fallen is Jewel of Gobi, fallen and lost forever, and all its glory gone! Desecration shall come to the altars, and the streets shall run red with blood. I see death for the king and shame for his people..."

For a time the soldiers beneath the wall had been silent, but now, spears lifted, they interrupted with a torrent of half-amused mockery. A bearded giant roared:

"Come down to us, old goat! We'll welcome you indeed!"

THE prophet's eyes dropped, and the shouting of the soldiers faded into stillness. Very softly the ancient spoke, yet each word was clear and distinct as a sword-blade.

"Ye shall ride through the streets of the city in triumph. And your king shall mount the silver throne. Yet from the forest shall come your doom; an old doom shall come down upon you, and none shall escape. He shall

return—He—the mighty one who dwelt here once...”

The prophet lifted his arms, staring straight into the red eye of the rising sun. “Evohé! Evohé!”

Then he stepped forward. Two steps and plunged. Straight down, his beard and robe streaming up, till the upthrust spears caught him, and he died.

And that day the gates of Sardopolis were burst in by giant battering-rams, and like an unleashed flood the men of Cyaxares poured into the city, wolves who slew and plundered and tortured mercilessly. Terror walked that day, and a haze of battle hung upon the roofs. The defenders were hunted down and slaughtered in the streets without mercy. Women were outraged, their children impaled, and the glory of Sardopolis faded in a smoke of shame and horror. The last glow of the setting sun touched the scarlet wyvern of Cyaxares floating from the tallest tower of the king’s palace.

Flambeaux were lighted in their sockets, till the great hall blazed with a red fire, reflected from the silver throne where the invader sat. His black beard was all bespattered with blood and grime, and slaves groomed him as he sat among his men, gnawing on a mutton-bone. Yet, despite the man’s gashed and broken armor and the filth that besmeared him, there was something unmistakably regal about his bearing. A king’s son was Cyaxares, the last of a line that had sprung from the dawn ages of Gobi when the feudal barons had reigned.

But his face was a tragic ruin.

Strength and power and nobility had once dwelt there, and traces of them still could be seen, as though in muddy water, through the mask of cruelty and vice that lay heavy upon Cyaxares. His gray eyes held a cold and passionless stare that vanished only in the crimson blaze of battle, and now those deadly eyes dwelt on the bound form of the conquered king of Sardopolis, Chalem.

In contrast with the huge figure of Cyaxares Chalem seemed slight; yet, despite his wounds, he stood stiffly upright, no trace of expression on his pale face.

A strange contrast! The marbled, tapestried throne-room of the palace was more suitable to gay pageantry than this grim scene. The only man who did not seem incongruously out of place stood beside the throne, a slim, dark youth, clad in silks and velvets that had apparently not been marred by the battle. This was Necho, the king’s confidant, and, some said, his familiar demon. Whence he had come no one knew but of his evil power over Cyaxares there was no doubt.

A little smile grew on the youth’s handsome face. Smoothing his curled dark hair, he leaned close and whispered to the king. The latter nodded, waved away a maiden who was oiling his beard, and said shortly:

“Your power is broken, Chalem. Yet are we merciful. Render homage, and you may have your life.”

For answer Chalem spat upon the marble flags at his feet.

A curious gleam came into Cyaxares' eyes. Half inaudibly he murmured, "A brave man. Too brave to die..."

Some impulse seemed to pull his head around until he met Necho's gaze. A message passed in that silent staring. For Cyaxares took from his side a long, bloodstained sword; he rose, stepped down from his dais—and swung the brand.

CHALEM made no move to evade the blow. The steel cut through bone and brain. As the dead man fell, Cyaxares stood looking down without a trace of expression. He wrenched his sword free.

"Fling this carrion to the vultures," he commanded.

From the group of prisoners near by came an angry oath. The king turned to face the man who had dared to speak. He gestured.

A pair of guards pushed forward a tall, well-muscled figure, yellow-haired, with a face strong despite its youth, now darkened with rage. The man wore no armor, and his torso was criss-crossed with wounds.

"Who are you?" Cyaxares asked with ominous restraint, the sword bare in his hand.

"King Chalem's son—Prince Raynor."

"You seek death?"

Raynor shrugged. "Death has come close to me today. Slay me if you will. I've butchered about a dozen of your wolves, anyway, and that's some satisfaction."

Behind Cyaxares came a rustle of silks as Necho moved slightly. The king's lips twitched beneath the shaggy beard. His face was suddenly hard and cruel again.

"So! Well, you will crawl to my feet before the next sun sets." He gestured. "No doubt there are torture vaults beneath the palace. Sudrach!"

A brawny, leather-clad man stepped forward and saluted. "You have heard my will. See to it."

"If I crawl to your feet," Raynor said quietly, "it'll be to hamstringing you, bloated toad."

The king drew in his breath with an angry sound. Without another word he nodded to Sudrach, and the torturer followed Raynor as he was conducted out. Then Cyaxares went back to his throne and mused for a time, till a slave brought him wine in a gilded chalice.

But the liquor had no power to break his dark mood. At last he rose and went to the dead king's apartments, which the invaders had not dared to plunder for fear of Cyaxares' wrath. Above the silken couch a gleaming image hung from its standard—the scarlet wyvern, wings spread, barbed tail stiffly upright. Cyaxares stood silently staring at it for a space.

He did not turn when he heard Necho's soft voice. The youth said, "The wyvern has conquered once again."

"Aye," Cyaxares said dully. "Once again, through vileness and black shame. It was an evil day when we met, Necho."

Low laughter came. "Yet you summoned me, as I remember. I was content enough in my own place, till you sent your summons."

Involuntarily the king shuddered. "I would Ishtar had sent down her lightnings upon me that night."

"Ishtar? You worship another god now."

Cyaxares swung about, snarling. "Necho, do not push me too far! I have still some power—"

"You have all power," the low voice said. "As you wished."

For a dozen heart-beats the king made no answer. Then he whispered, "I am the first to bring shame upon our royal blood. When I was crowned I swore many a vow on the tombs of my fathers—and for a time I kept those vows. I ruled with truth and chivalry—"

"And you sought wisdom."

"Aye. I was not content. I sought to make my name great, and to that end I talked with sorcerers—with Bleys of the Dark Pool."

"Bleys," Necho murmured. "He was learned, in his way. Yet—he died."

The king's breathing was unsteady. "I know. I slew him—at your command. And you showed me what happened thereafter."

"Bleys is not happy now," Necho said softly. "He served the same master as you. Wherefore—" The quiet voice grew imperious. "Wherefore live! For by our bargain I shall give you all power on earth, fair women and treasure beyond imagination. But when you die—you shall serve me!"

The other stood silent, while veins swelled on his swarthy forehead. Suddenly, with a bellowing, inarticulate oath, he snatched up his sword. Bright steel flamed through the air—and rebounded, clashing. Up the king's arm and through all his body raced a tingling shock, and simultaneously the regal apartment seemed to darken around him. The fires of the flambeaux darkened. The air was chill—and it whispered.

Steadily the room grew blacker. Now all was midnight black, save for a shining figure that stood immobile, blazing with weird and unearthly radiance. Little murmurs rustled through the deadly stillness. The body of Necho shone brighter, blindingly. And he stood without moving or speaking, till the king shrank with a shuddering cry, his blade clattering on the marble.

"No!" he half sobbed, "For His mercy—no!"

"He has no mercy," the low voice came, bleak and chill. "Therefore worship

me, dog whom men call king. Worship me!"

And Cyaxares worshiped...

CHAPTER II

Blood in the City

PRINCE RAYNOR was acutely uncomfortable. He was stretched upon a rack, staring up at the dripping stones of the vault's roof, and Sudrach, the torturer, was heating iron bars on the hearth. A great cup of wine stood nearby, and occasionally Sudrach, humming under his breath, would reach for it and gulp noisily. "A thousand pieces of gold if you help me escape," Raynor repeated without much hope.

"What good is gold to a flayed man?" Sudrach asked. "That would be my fate if you escaped. Also, where would you get a thousand golden pieces?"

"In my apartment," Raynor said. "Safely hidden."

"You may be lying. At any rate, you'll tell me where this hiding place is when I burn out your eyes. Thus I'll have the gold—if it exists—without danger to myself."

Raynor made no answer, but instead tugged at the cords that bound him. They did not give. Yet Raynor strained until blood throbbed in his temples, and was no closer to freedom when he relaxed at last.

"You'll but wear yourself out," Sudrach said over his shoulder. "Best save your strength. You'll need it for screaming." He took an iron bar from the fire. Its end glowed redly, and Raynor watched the implement with fascinated horror. An unpleasant way to die...

But as the glowing bar approached Raynor's chest there came an interruption. The iron door was flung open, and a tall, huge-muscled black entered. Sudrach turned, involuntarily lifting the bar as a weapon. Then he relaxed, his eyes questioning.

"Who the devil are you?" he grunted.

"Eblik, the Nubian," said the black, bowing. "I bear a message from the king. I lost my way in this damned palace, and just now blundered to my goal. The king has two more prisoners for your hands."

"Good!" Sudrach rubbed his hands. "Where are they?"

"In the—" The other stepped closer. He fumbled in his belt.

Then, abruptly, a blood-reddened dagger flashed up and sheathed itself in flesh. Sudrach bellowed, thrust out clawing hands. He doubled up slowly, while his attacker leaped free, and then he collapsed upon the dank stones and lay silent, twitching a little.

"The gods be praised!" Raynor grunted. "Eblik, faithful servant, you come in time!"

Eblik's dark, gargoyle-like face was worried. "Let me—" He slashed the cords that bound the prisoner. "It wasn't easy. When we were separated, in the battle, master, I knew Sardopolis would fall. I changed clothes with one of Cyaxares' men—whom I slew—and waited my chance to escape. It was by the merest luck that I heard you had offended the king and were to be tortured. So—" He shrugged.

Raynor, free at last, sprang up from the rack, stretching his stiffened muscles. "Will it be easy to escape?"

"Perhaps. Many are drunk or asleep. At any rate, we can't stay here."

The two slipped cautiously out into the corridor. A guard lay dead, weltering in his blood, not far away. They hurried past him, and silently threaded their way through the palace, more than once dodging into passages to evade detection.

"If I knew where Cyaxares slept, I'd take my chances on slitting his throat," Raynor said. "Wait! This way!"

At the end of a narrow hall was a door which, pushed open, showed a moonlit expanse of garden. Eblik said, "I remember—I entered this way. Here—" He dived into a bush and presently emerged with a sword and a heavy battle-ax; the latter he thrust in his girdle. "What now?"

"Over the wall," Raynor said, and led the way. The high rampart was not easy to scale, but a spreading tree grew close to it, and eventually the two had surmounted the barrier. As Raynor dropped lightly to the ground he heard a sudden cry, and, glancing around, saw a group of men, armor gleaming in the moonlight, racing toward him. He cursed softly.

Eblik was already fleeing, his long legs covering the yards with amazing speed. Raynor followed, though his first impulse was to wait and give battle. But in the stronghold of Cyaxares such an action would have been suicidal.

Behind the pair the pursuers bayed menace. Swords came out flashing. Raynor clutched his comrade's arm, dragged him into a side alley, and the two sped on, frantically searching for a hiding-place. It was Eblik who found sanctuary five minutes later. Passing the blood-smeared, corpse-littered courtyard of a temple, he gasped a hasty word, and in a moment both Raynor and Eblik were across the moonlit stretch and fleeing into the interior of the temple.

From a high roof hung a golden ball, dim in the gloom. This was the sacred house of the Sun, the dwelling place of the primal god Ahmon. Eblik had been here before, and knew the way. He guided Raynor past torn tapestries and overthrown censers, and then, halting before a golden curtain, he listened. There was no sound of pursuit.

"Good!" the Nubian warrior said. "I've heard of a secret way out of here, though where it is I don't know. Maybe we can find it."

HE drew the curtain aside, and the two entered the sanctuary of the god. Involuntarily Raynor whispered a curse, and his brown fingers tightened on

his rapier hilt.

A small chamber faced them, with walls and floor and ceiling blue as the summer sky. It was empty, save for a single huge sphere of gold in the center.

Broken upon the gleaming ball was a man.

From the wall a single flambeau cast a flickering radiance on the twisted, bloodstained body, on the white beard that was dappled with blood. The man lay stretched across the globe, his hands and feet impaled with iron spikes that had been driven deeply into the gold.

Froth bubbled on his lips. His hoary head rolled; eyes stared unseeingly. He gasped, "Water! For the love of Ahmon, a drop of water!"

Raynor's lips were a hard white line as he sprang forward. Eblik helped him as he pried the spikes free. The tortured priest moaned and bit at his mangled lips, but made no outcry. Presently he lay prostrate on the blue floor. With a muttered word, Eblik disappeared, and came back bearing a cup which he held to the dying man's mouth.

The priest drank deeply. He whispered, "Prince Raynor! Is the King safe?"

Swiftly Raynor answered. The other's white head rolled.

"Lift me up—swiftly!"

Raynor obeyed. The priest ran his hands over the golden sphere, and suddenly, beneath his probing fingers, it split in half like a cloven fruit, and in its center a gap widened. A steep staircase led down into hidden depths.

"The altar is open? I cannot see well. Take me down there. They cannot find us in the hidden chamber."

Raynor swung the priest to his shoulders and without hesitation started down the steps, Eblik behind him. There was a low grating as the altar swung back, a gleaming sphere that would halt and baffle pursuit. They were in utter darkness. The prince moved cautiously, testing each step before he shifted his weight. At last he felt the floor level beneath his feet.

SLOWLY, a dim light began to grow, like the first glow of dawn. It revealed a bare stone vault, roughly constructed of mortised stones, strangely at variance with the palatial city above. In one wall a dark hole showed. On the floor was a circular disk of metal, its center hollowed out into a cup. Within this cup lay a broken shard of some rock that resembled gold-shot marble, half as large as Raynor's hand. On the shard were carved certain symbols the prince did not recognize, and one that he did—the ancient looped cross, sacred to the sun-god. He put the priest down gently, but nevertheless the man moaned in agony. The maimed hands clutched at air.

"Ahmon! Great Ahmon... give me more water!"

Eblik obeyed. Strengthened, the priest fumbled for and gripped Raynor's arm.

"You are strong. Good! Strength is needed for the mission you must undertake."

"Mission?"

The priest's fingers tightened. "Aye; Ahmon guided your steps hither. You must be the messenger of vengeance. Not I. I have not long to live. My strength ebbs..."

He was silent for a time, and then resumed, "I have a tale to tell you. Do you know the legend of the founding of Sardopolis? How, long ago, a very terrible god had his altar in this spot, and was served by all the forest dwellers... till those who served Ahmon came? They fought and prisoned the forest god, drove him hence to the Valley of Silence, and he lies bound there by strong magic and the seal of Ahmon. Yet there was a prophecy that one day Ahmon would be overthrown, and the bound god would break his fetters and return to his first dwelling place, to the ruin of Sardopolis. The day of the prophecy is at hand!"

The priest pointed. "All is dark. Yet the seal should be there—is it not?"

Raynor said, "A bit of marble—"

"Aye—the talisman. Lift it up!" The voice was now peremptory. Raynor obeyed.

"I have it."

"Good. Guard it well. Lift the disk now."

Almost apprehensively the prince tugged the disk up, finding it curiously light. Beneath was nothing but a jagged stone, crudely carved with archaic figures and symbols. A stone—yet Raynor knew, somehow, that the thing was horribly old, that it had existed from the dawn ages of Gobi.

"The altar of the forest god," said the priest. "He will return to this spot when he is freed. You must go to the Reaver of the Rock, and give him the talisman. He will know its meaning. So shall Ahmon be avenged upon the tyrant..."

Suddenly the priest surged upright, his arms lifted, tears streaming from the blind eyes. He cried, Ohé—ohé! Fallen forever is the House of Ahmon! Fallen to the dust..."

He fell, as a tree falls, crashing down upon the stones, his arms still extended as though in worship. So died the last priest of Ahmon in Gobi.

Raynor did not move for a while. Then he bent over the lax body. A hasty examination showed him that the man was dead, and shrugging, he thrust the marble shard into his belt.

"I suppose that's the way out," he said, pointing to the gap in the wall, "though I don't like the look of it. Well—come on."

He squeezed himself into the narrow hole, cursing softly, and Eblik followed.

CHAPTER III

The Reaver of the Rook

WITH slow steps Cyaxares paced his apartment, his shaggy brows drawn together in a frown. Once or twice his hand closed convulsively on his sword-hilt, and again the secret agony within him made him groan aloud. But not once did he glance at the scarlet symbol of the wyvern that hung above his couch.

Going to a window, he looked down over the city, and then his gaze went out to the plain and the distant, forested mountains. He sighed heavily.

A voice said, "You may well look there, Cyaxares. For there is your doom, unless you act swiftly."

"Is it you, Necho?" the king asked heavily. "What new shameful must I work now?"

"Two men go south to the Valley of Silence. They must be slain ere they reach it."

"Why? What aid can they get there?"

Necho did not answer at first. His voice was hesitant when he said, "The gods have their own secrets. There is something in the Valley of Silence that can send all your glory and power crashing down about your head. Nor can I aid you then. I can only advise you now and if you follow my advice—well. But act I cannot and must not, for a reason which you need not know. Send out your men therefore, with orders to overtake those two and slay them—swiftly!"

"As you will," the king said, and turned to summon a servitor.

"SOLDIERS follow us," Eblik said, shading his eyes with a calloused hand. He was astride a rangy dun mare, and beside him Raynor rode on a great gray charger, red of nostril and fiery of eye. The latter turned in the saddle and looked back.

"By the gods!" he observed. "Cyaxares has sent half an army after us. It's lucky we managed to steal these mounts."

The two had reined their horses at the summit of a low rise in the forest. Back of them the ground sloped to the great plain and the gutted city of Sardopolis; before them jagged mountains rose, covered with oak and pine and fir. The Nubian licked dry lips, said thirstily, "The fires of all hells are in my belly. Let's get out of this wilderness, where there's nothing to drink but water."

"The Reaver may feed you wine—or blood," Raynor said, "Nevertheless, our best chance is to find this Reaver and seek his aid. A mercenary once told me of the road."

He clapped his heels against the charger's flanks, and the steed bounded forward. In a moment the ridge had hidden them from the men of Cyaxares. So the two penetrated deeper and deeper into the craggy, desolate

wilderness, a place haunted by wolves and great bears and, men whispered, monstrous, snake-like cockadrills.

They went by snow-peaked mountains that lifted white cones to the blue sky, and they fled along the brink of deep gorges from which the low thunder of cataracts rose tumultuously. And always behind them rode the pursuers, a grim and warlike company, following slowly but relentlessly.

But Raynor used more than one stratagem. Thrice he guided his charger up streams along which the wise animal picked its way carefully; again he dislodged an avalanche to block the trail. So it came about that when the two rode down into a great, grassy basin, the men of Cyaxares were far behind.

On all sides the mountains rose. Ahead was a broad, meadow-like valley, strewn with thickets and green groves. Far ahead the precipice rose in a tall rampart, split in one place into a narrow canyon.

To the right of the gorge lifted a great gray rock, mountain-huge, bare save for a winding trail that twisted up its surface to a castle upon the summit. Dwarfed by distance, the size of the huge structure could yet be appreciated—a castle of stone, incongruously bedecked with fluttering, bright banners and pennons.

Raynor pointed. "He dwells there. The Reaver of the Rock."

"And here comes danger," Eblik said, whipping out his battle-ax. "Look!"

From a grove of nearby trees burst a company of horsemen, glittering in the afternoon sunlight, spears lifted, casques and helms a gleam. Shouting, they rode down upon the waiting pair. Raynor fingered his sword-hilt, hesitating.

"Put up your blade," he directed Eblik. "We come in friendship here."

The Nubian was doubtful. "But do they know that?"

Nevertheless he sheathed his sword and waited till the dozen riders reined in a few paces away. One spurred forward, a tall man astride a wiry black.

"Are you tired of life, that you seek the Reaver's stronghold?" he demanded. "Or do you mean to enter in his service?"

"We bear a message," Raynor countered. "A message from a priest of Ahmon."

"We know no gods here," the other grunted.

"Well, you know warfare, or I've misread the dents in your armor," Raynor snapped. "Sardopolis is fallen! Cyaxares has taken the city and slain the king, my father, Chalem of Sardopolis."

TO his amazement a bellow of laughter burst from the troop. The spokesman said, "What has that to do with us? We own no king but the Reaver. Yet you shall come safely before him, if that is your will. It were shameful to battle a dozen to two, and the rags you wear aren't worth the

taking.”

Eblik started like a ruffled peacock. “By the gods, you have little courtesy here! For a coin I’d slit your weasand!”

The other rubbed his throat reflectively, grinning. “You may have a trial at that later, if you wish, my ragged gargoyle. But come, now, for the Reaver is in hall, and tonight he rides forth on a raid.”

With a nod Raynor spurred his horse forward, the Nubian at his side, and, surrounded by the men of the Reaver, they fled across the valley to the castle. Thence they mounted the steep, dangerous path up the craggy ramp, till at last they crossed a drawbridge and dismounted in a courtyard.

So they took Raynor before the Reaver of the Rock.

A great, shining, red-cheeked man he was, with grizzled gray beard and a crown set rakishly askew on tangled locks. He sat before a blazing fire in a high-roofed stone hall, an iron chest open at his feet. From this he was taking jewels and golden chains and ornaments that might have graced a king’s treasury, examining them carefully, and making notes with a quill pen upon a parchment on his lap.

He looked up; merry eyes dwelt on Raynor’s flushed face and touseled yellow hair.

“Well, Samar, what is it now?”

“Two strangers. They have a message for you—or so they say.”

Suddenly the Reaver’s face changed. He leaned forward, spilling treasure from his lap. “A message? Now there is only one message that can ever come to me... speak, you! Who sent you?”

RAYNOR stepped forward confidently. From his belt he drew the broken shard of marble, and extended it.

“A priest of Ahmon bade me give you this,” he said. “Sardopolis is fallen.”

For a heartbeat there was silence. Then the Reaver took the shard, examining it carefully. He murmured, “Aye. So my rule passes. For long and long my fathers held the Rock, waiting for the summons that never came. And now it has come.”

He looked up. “Go, all of you, save you two. And you, Samar—wait, for you should know of this.”

The others departed. The Reaver shouted after them, “Summon Delphia!”

He turned to stare into the fire. “So I, Kialeh, must fulfill the ancient pledge of my ancestors. And invaders are on my marches. Well—”

There came an interruption. A girl strode in, dark head proudly erect, slim figure corseted in dented armor. She went to the Reaver, flung a blazing jewel in his lap.

"Is this my guerdon?" she snarled. "Faith o' the gods, I took Ossan's castle almost single-handed. And my share is less than the share of Samar here!"

"You are my daughter," the Reaver said quietly. "Shall I give you more honor, then, in our free brotherhood? Be silent. Listen."

Raynor was examining the girl's face with approval. There was beauty there, wild dark lawless beauty, and strength that showed in the firm set of the jaw and the latent fire of the jet eyes. Ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about steel-corseleted shoulders.

The girl said, "Well? Have you had your fill of staring?"

"Let be," the Reaver grunted. "I have a tale for all of you... listen."

His deep voice grew stronger. "Ages on ages ago this was a barbarous land. The people worshipped a forest-god called—" his hand moved in a queer quick sign—"called Pan. Then from the north came two kings, brothers, bringing with them the power of the sun-god, Ahmon. There was battle in the land then, and blood and reddened steel. Yet Ahmon conquered.

"The forest-god was bound within the Valley of Silence, which lies beyond my castle. The two kings made an agreement. One was to rule Sardopolis, and the other, the younger, was to rear a great castle at the gateway of the Valley of Silence, and guard the fettered god. Until a certain word should come..."

The Reaver weighed a glittering stone in his hand. "For there was a prophecy that one day the rule of Ahmon should be broken. Then it was foretold that the forest-god should be freed, and should bring vengeance upon the destroyers of Sardopolis. For long and long my ancestors have guarded the Rock—and I, Kialeh, am the last. Ah," he sighed. "The great days are over indeed. Never again will the Reaver ride to rob and plunder and mock at gods. Never—what's this?"

A man-at-arms had burst into the hall, eyes alight, face fierce as a wolf's. "Kialeh! An army is in the valley!"

"By Shaitan!" Raynor cursed. "Cyaxares' men! They pursued us—"

The girl, Delphia, swung about. "Gather the men! I'll take command—"

Suddenly the Reaver let out a roaring shout. "No! By all the gods I've flouted—no! Would you grudge me my last battle, girl? Gather your men, Samar—but I command!"

Samar sprang to obey. Delphia gripped her father's arm. "I fight with you, then."

"I have another task for you. Guide these two through the Valley of Silence, to the place you know. Here—" he thrust the marble shard at the prince. "Take this. You'll know how to use it when the time comes."

Then he was gone, and curtains of black samite swayed into place behind him.

Raynor was curiously eying the girl. Her face was pale beneath its tan, and her eyes betrayed fear. Red battle she could face unflinchingly, but the thought of entering the Valley of Silence meant to her something far more terrible. Yet she said, "Come. We have little time."

Eblik followed Raynor and Delphia from the hall. They went through the harsh splendor of the castle, till at last the girl halted before a blank stone wall. She pressed a hidden spring. A section of the rock swung away, revealing the dim-lit depths of a passage.

Delphia paused on the threshold. Her dark eyes flickered over the two.

"Hold fast to your courage," she whispered—and her lips were trembling. "For now we go down into Hell..."

CHAPTER IV

The Valley of Silence

YET at first there seemed nothing terrible about the valley. They entered it from a cavern that opened on a thick forest, and, glancing around, Raynor saw tall mountainous ramparts that made the place a prison indeed. It was past sunset, yet already a full moon was rising over the eastern cliffs, outlining the Reaver's castle in black silhouette.

They entered the forest.

Moss underfoot deadened their footsteps. They walked in dim gloom, broken by moonlit traceries filtered through the leaves. And now Raynor noted the curious stillness that hung over all.

There was no sound. The noise of birds and beasts did not exist here, nor did the breath of wind rustle the silent trees. But, queerly, the prince thought there was a sound whispering through the forest, a sound below the threshold of hearing, which nevertheless played on his taut nerves.

"I don't like this," Eblik said, his ugly face set and strained. His voice seemed to die away with uncanny swiftness.

"Pan is fettered here," Delphia whispered. "Yet is his power manifest..."

Soundlessly they went through the soundless forest. And now Raynor realized that, slowly and imperceptibly, the shadowy whisper he had sensed was growing louder—or else his ears were becoming more attuned to it. A very dim murmur, faint and far away, which yet seemed to have within it a multitude of voices...

The voices of the winds... the murmur of forests... the goblin laughter of shadowed brooks...

It was louder now, and Raynor found himself thinking of all the innumerable sounds of the primeval wilderness. Bird-notes, and the call of beasts...

And under all, a dim, powerful motif, beat a wordless shrilling, a faint piping that set the prince's skin to crawling as he heard it.

"It is the tide of life," Delphia said softly. "The heart-beat of the first god. The pulse of earth."

For the first time Raynor felt something of the primal secrets of the world. Often he had walked alone in the forest, but never yet had the hidden heart of the wilderness reached fingers into his soul. He sensed a mighty and very terrible power stirring latent in the soil beneath him, a thing bound inextricably to the brain of man by the cords of the flesh which came up, by slow degrees, from the seething oceans which once rolled unchecked over a young planet. Unimaginable eons ago man had come from the earth, and the brand of his mother-world was burned deep within his soul.

Afraid, yet strangely happy, as men are sometimes happy in their dreams, the prince motioned for his companions to increase their pace.

The forest gave place to a wide clearing, with shattered white stones rearing to the sky. Broken plinths and peristyles gleamed in the moonlight. A temple had once existed here. Now all was overgrown with moss and the slow-creeping lichen. "Here," the girl said in a low whisper. "Here..."

In the center of a ring of fallen pillars they halted. Delphia pointed to a block of marble, on which a metal disk was inset. In a cuplike depression in the metal lay a broken bit of marble.

"The talisman," Delphia said. "Touch it to the other."

Silence... and the unearthly tide of hidden life swelling and ebbing all about them. Raynor took the amulet from his belt, stepped forward, fighting down his fear. He bent above the disk—touched marble shard to marble—

As iron to lodestone, the two fragments drew together. They coalesced into one. The jagged line of breakage faded and vanished.

Raynor held the talisman—complete, unbroken!

Now, quite suddenly, the vague murmurings mounted into a roar—gay, jubilant, triumphant! The metal disk shattered into fragments. Beneath it the prince glimpsed a small carved stone, the twin of the one beneath the temple of Ahmon.

Above the unceasing roar sounded a penetrating shrill piping.

Delphia clutched at Raynor's arm, pulled him back. Her face was chalk-white.

"The pipes!" she gasped. "Back-quickly! To see Pan is to die!"

Louder the roar mounted, and louder. In its bellow was a deep shout of alien laughter, a thunder of goblin merriment. The chuckle of the shadowed brooks was the crash of cataracts and waterfalls.

The forest stirred to a breath of gusty wind.

"Back!" the girl said urgently. "Back! We have freed Pan!"

Without conscious thought Raynor thrust the talisman into his belt, turned,

and, with Delphia and Eblik beside him, fled into the moonlit shadows. Above him branches tossed in a mounting wind. The wild shrieking of the pipes grew louder.

Tide of earth life—rising to a mad paean of triumph!

The wind exulted:

“Free... free!”

And the unseen rivers shouted:

“Great Pan is free!”

CLATTERING of hoofs came from the distance. Bleating calls sounded from afar.

The girl stumbled, almost fell. Raynor gripped at her arm, pulling her upright, fighting the unreasoning terror mounting within him. The Nubian’s grim face was glistening with sweat.

“Pan, Pan is free!”

“Evohé!”

The black mouth of a cavern loomed before them. At its threshold Raynor cast a glance behind him, saw all the great forest swaying and tossing. His breath coming unevenly, he turned, following his companions into the cave.

“Shaitan!” he whispered. “What demon have I loosed on the land?”

Then it was race, sprint, pound up the winding passage, up an unending flight of stone steps, through a wall that lifted at Delphia’s touch—and into a castle shaking with battle. Raynor stopped short, whipping out his sword, staring at shadows flickering in the distance.

“Cyxares’ men,” he said. “They’ve entered.”

In the face of flesh-and-blood antagonists the prince was suddenly himself again. Delphia was already running down the corridor, blade out. Raynor and the Nubian followed.

They burst into the great hall. A ring of armed men surrounded a little group who were making their last stand before the hearth. Towering above the others Raynor saw the tangled locks and bristling beard of Kialeh, the Reaver, and beside him his lieutenant Samar. Corpses littered the floor.

“Ho!” roared the Reaver, as he caught sight of the newcomers. “You come in time! In time—to die with” us!”

CHAPTER V

Cursed Be the City

GRIM laughter touched Raynor’s lips. He drove in, sheathing his sword in a brawny throat, whipped it out, steel singing. Nor were Eblik and Delphia far behind. Her blade and the Nubian’s ax wreaked deadly havoc among

Cyaxares' soldiers, who, not expecting attack from the rear, were confused.

The hall became filled with a milling, yelling throng, from which one soldier, a burly giant, emerged, shouting down the others.

"Cut them down! They're but three!"

Then all semblance of sanity was lost in a blaze of crimson battle, swinging brands, and huge maces that crashed down, splitting skulls and spattering gray brain-stuff. Delphia kept shoulder to shoulder with Raynor, seemingly heedless of danger, her blade flicking wasplike through the air. And the prince guarded her as best he could, the sword weaving a bright maze of deadly lightnings as it whirled.

The Reaver swung, and his sword crushed a helm and bit deep into bone. He strained to tug it free—and a soldier thrust up at his throat. Samar deflected the blade with his own weapon, and that cost him his life. In that moment of inattention a driven spear smashed through corselet and jerkin and drank deep of the man's life-blood.

Silent, he fell.

The Reaver went beserk. Yelling, he sprang over his lieutenant's corpse and swung. For a few moments he held back his enemies—and then someone flung a shield. Instinctively Kialeh lifted his blade to parry.

The wolves leaped in to the kill.

Roaring, the Reaver went down, blood gushing through his shaggy beard, staining its iron-gray with red. When Raynor had time to look again, Kialeh lay a corpse on his own hearth, his head amid bright jewels that had spilled from the overturned treasure-chest.

The three stood together now, the last of the defenders—Raynor and Eblik and Delphia. The soldiers ringed them, panting for their death, yet hesitating before the menace of cold steel. None wished to be the first to die.

And, as they waited, a little silence fell. The prince heard a sound he remembered.

Dim and far away, a low roaring drifted to his ears. And the eerie shrilling of pipes...

It grew louder. The soldiers heard it now. They glanced at one another askance. There was something about that sound that chilled the blood.

It swelled to a gleeful shouting, filling all the castle. A breeze blew through the hall, tugging with elfin fingers at sweat-moist skin. It rose to a gusty blast.

In its murmur voices whispered.

"Evohé! Evohé

They grew louder, mad and unchecked. They exulted.

"Pan, Pan is free!"

"Gods!" a soldier cursed. "What devil's work is this?" He swung about, sword ready.

The curtains of samite were ripped away by the shrieking wind. Deafeningly the voices exulted:

"Pan is free!"

The piping shrilled out. There came the clatter of ringing little hoofs. The castle rocked and shuddered.

Some vague, indefinable impulse made Raynor snatch at his belt, gripping the sun-god's talisman in bronzed fingers. From it a grateful warmth seemed to flow into his flesh—and the roaring faded.

He dragged Delphia and the Nubian behind him. "Close to me! Stay close!"

The room was darkening. No—it seemed as though a cloudy veil of mist dropped before the three, guarding them. Raynor lifted the seal of Ahmon.

The fog-veils swirled. Dimly through them Raynor could see the soldiers moving swiftly, frantically, like rats caught in a trap. He tightened one arm about Delphia's steel-armored waist.

Suddenly the hall was ice-cold. The castle shook as though gripped by Titan hands. The floor swayed beneath the prince's feet.

The mists darkened. Through rifts he saw half-guessed figures that leaped and bounded... heard elfin hoofs clicking. Horned and shaggy-furred beings that cried jubilantly as they danced to the pipes of Pan...

Faun and dryad and satyr swung in a mad saraband beyond the shrouding mists. Faintly there came the screaming of men, half drowned in the loud shrilling.

"Evohé!" the demoniac rout thundered. "Evohé! All hail, O Pan!"

With a queer certainty Raynor knew that it was time to leave the castle—and swiftly. Already the great stone structure was shaking like a tree in a hurricane. With a word to his companions he stepped forward hesitantly, the talisman held high.

The walls of mist moved with him. Outside the fog-walls the monstrous figures gamboled. But the soldiers of Cyaxares screamed no more.

Through a castle toppling into ruin the three sped, into the courtyard, across the drawbridge, and down the face of the Rock. Nor did they pause till they were safely in the broad plain of the valley.

"The castle!" Eblik barked, pointing. "See? It falls."

And it was true. Down it came thundering, while clouds of ruin spurted up. Then there was only a shattered wreck on the summit of the Rock...

Delphia caught her breath in a little sob. She murmured, "The end of the

Reavers for all time. I—I lived in the castle for more than twenty years. And now it's gone like a puff of dust before the wind."

The walls of fog had vanished. Raynor returned the talisman to his belt. Eblik, staring up at the Rock, swallowed uneasily.

"Well, what now?" he asked.

"Back along the way we came," the prince said. "It's the only way out of this wilderness that I know of."

The girl nodded. "Yes. Beyond the mountains lie deserts, save toward Sardopolis. But we have no mounts."

"Then we'll walk," Eblik observed, but Raynor caught his arm and pointed.

"There! Horses—probably stampeded from the castle. And—Shaitan! There's my gray charger. "Good!"

So, presently, the three rode toward Sardopolis, conscious of a weird dim throbbing that seemed to pulse in the air all about them.

AT dawn they topped a ridge and saw before them the plain. All three reined in their mounts, staring. Beneath them lay the city—but changed!

It was a ruin.

Doom had come to Sardopolis in the night. The mighty towers and battlements had fallen, and huge gaps were opened in the walls. Of the king's palace nothing was left but a single tower, from which, ironically, the wyvern banner flew. As they watched, that pinnacle, too, swayed and tottered and fell, and the scarlet wyvern drifted down into the dust of Sardopolis.

On fallen towers and peristyles distant figures moved, with odd, ungainly boundings. Quickly Raynor turned his eyes away. But he could not shut his ears to the distant crying of pipes, gay and pagan, yet with a faintly mournful undertone.

"Pan has returned to his first altar," Delphia said quietly. "We had best not loiter here."

"By all hell, I agree," the Nubian grunted, digging his heels into his steed's flanks. "Where now, Raynor?"

"Westward, I think, to the Sea of Shadows. There are cities on its shore, and galleys to take us to a haven. Unless—" He turned questioning eyes on Delphia.

She laughed, a little bitterly. "I cannot stay here. The land is sunk back into the pit. Pan rules. I go with you."

The three rode to the west. They skirted, but did not enter, a small grove where a man lay in agony. It was Cyaxares, a figure so dreadfully mangled that only sheer will kept him alive. His face was a bloody mask. The once-rich garments were tattered and filthy. He saw the three riders, and

raised his voice in a weak cry which the wind drowned.

Beside the king a slim, youthful figure lounged, leaning idly against an oak-trunk. It was Necho.

"Call louder, Cyaxares," he said. "With a horse under you, you can reach the Sea of Shadows. And if you succeed in doing that, you will yet live for many years."

Again the king cried out. The wind took his voice and shredded it to impotent fragments.

Necho laughed softly. "Too late, now. They are gone."

CYAXARES let his battered head drop, his beard trailing in the dirt. Through shredded lips he muttered, "if I reach the Sea of Shadows... I live."

"True. But if you do not, you die. And then—" Low laughter shook the other.

Groaning, the king dragged himself forward. Necho followed.

"A good horse can reach the Sea of Shadows in three days. If you walk swiftly, you may reach it in six. But you must hurry. Why do you not rise, my Cyaxares?"

The king spat out bitter oaths. In agony he pulled himself forward, leaving a trail of blood on the grass... blood that dripped unceasingly from the twin raw stumps just above his ankles.

"The stone that fell upon you was sharp. Cyaxares, was it not?" Necho mocked. "But hurry! You have little time. There are mountains to climb and rivers to cross..."

So, in the trail of Raynor and Eblik and Delphia, crept the dying king, hearing fainter and ever fainter the triumphant pipes of Pan from Sardopolis. And presently, patient as the silent Necho, a vulture dipped against the blue and took up the pursuit, the beat of its wings distinctly audible in the heavy, stagnant silence...

And Raynor and Delphia and Eblik rode onward toward the sea...

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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