

The Coming of the White Worm

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Evagh the warlock, dwelling beside the boreal sea, was aware of many strange and untimely portents in mid-summer. Chilly burned the sun above Mhu Thulan from a heaven clear and pallid as ice. At eve the aurora was hung from zenith to earth like an arras in a high chamber of gods. Wan and rare were the poppies and small

the anemones in the cliff-hidden vales behind Evagh's house; and the fruits in his walled garden were pale of rind and green at the core. He saw by day the unseasonable flight of great multitudes of fowl, going southward from the isles beyond Mhu Thulan; and by night he heard the clamor of other passing multitudes.

Now Evagh was troubled by these portents, for his magic could not wholly interpret them. And the rude fisher-folk on the shore of the haven below his house were also troubled in their fashion. Day by day they had gone forth, through the summer in their coracles of elk-hide and willow, casting their seines: but in the seines they

drew only dead fishes, blasted as if by fire or extreme cold, and because of this, as the summer drew on, it came to pass that few of them fared any longer to sea.

Then, out of the north, where ships from Cerngoth were wont to ply among the Arctic islands, a galley came drifting with idle oars and aimlessly veering helm. And the tide beached it among the fisherman's boats on the sands beneath the cliff-built house of Evagh. And, thronging about the galley, the fishers beheld its oarsmen

still at the oars and its captain at the helm. But the faces and hands of all were white as leprosy; and the

pupils of their open eyes had faded strangely, being indistinguishable from the whites; and a blankness of horror was within them like ice in deep pools fast frozen to the bottom.

Loath were the fishers to touch the dead men; and they murmured, saying that a doom was upon the sea, and a curse upon all seafaring things and people. But Evagh, deeming that the bodies would rot in the sun and would breed pestilence, commanded them to build a pile of driftwood about the galley. And when the pile had risen above the bulwarks, hiding from view the dead rowers, he fired it with his own hands.

High flamed the pile, and smoke ascended black as a storm-cloud, blowing in windy volumes. But when the fire sank, the bodies of the oarsmen were still sitting amid the mounded embers, and their arms were still outstretched in the posture of rowing, and their fingers were clenched; though the oars had now dropped away from them in brands and ashes. And the galley's captain stood upright still in his place: though the burnt helm had fallen beside him. Naught but the raiment of the corpses had been consumed; and they show white as marble above the charrings of wood; and nowhere upon them was there any blackness left by the fire.

Deeming this thing an ill prodigy, the fishers were all aghast, and they fled swiftly to the highmost rocks. But the sorcerer Evagh awaited the cooling of the brands.

Quickly the brands darkened; but smoke arose from them still throughout the noon and afternoon; and still they were overhot for human treading when the hour drew toward sunset. So Evagh fetched water in urns from the sea and cast it upon the ashes and charrings so that he might approach the corpses. After the smoke and

hissing had died, he went forward. Nearing the bodies he was aware of a great coldness; and the coldness began to ache in his hands and ears, and smote sharply through his mantle of fur. Going still closer, he touched one of the bodies with his fore fingertip; and the finger, though lightly pressed and quickly withdrawn, was seared as if by flame.

Evagh was much amazed: for the condition of the corpses was a thing unknown to him heretofore; and in all his science of wizardry there was naught to enlighten him.

Returning to his house ere night, he burned at each door and window the gums that are most offensive to the northern demons. Afterward he perused with sedulous care the writings of Pnom, in which are collated many powerful exorcisms against the white spirits of the pole. For these spirits, it seemed, had laid their power upon

the galley's crew; and he could not but apprehend some further working of their power.

Though a fire burned in the chamber, piled with fat pine and terebinth, a deadly chill began to invade the air toward midnight. And Evagh's fingers grew numb on the sheets of parchment, so that he could scarce turn them. And the cold deepened steadily, slowing his blood as if with ice; and he felt on his face the breathing of an icy

wind. Yet the heavy doors and stout-paned windows were tightly closed; and the fire blazed high in no need of replenishment.

Then, with eyes whose very lids stiffened about them, Evagh saw that the room grew brighter with a light shining through the northern windows. Pale was the light, and it entered the room in a great beam falling directly upon him where he sat. And the light seared his eyes with a chill radiance, and the cold sharpened as if somehow one with the brightness; and the wind blew swiftness out of the light, seeming no longer air but an element rare and unbreathable as ether. Vainly, with numbing thoughts, he strove to recall the exorcisms of Pnom. And his breath forsook him on the thin wind, and he fell down in a sort of waking swoon that was nigh to death. He seemed to hear voices muttering unfamiliar spells, while the bleak light and ether ebbed and flowed like a tide about him. And in time it seemed that his eyes and his flesh were tempered to endure them, and he breathed once more, and his blood quickened again in his veins; and the swoon passed, and he rose up like one that rises from the dead.

Full upon him poured the strange light through the windows. But the stillness of cold was gone from his limbs, and he felt no more of chillness than was natural to the late summer night. Looking forth from one of windows, he witnessed a strange marvel: for in the harbor there towered an iceberg such as no vessel had yet sighted in its seafaring to the north. It filled the broad haven from shore to shore, and sheered up to a height immeasurable with piled escarpments and tiered precipices; and its pinnacles hung like towers in the zenith. It was vaster and steeper than the mountain Yarak, which marks the site of the boreal pole; and from it there fell upon sea and land a frosty glittering paler and brighter than the light of the full moon.

On the shore below were the charrings of the beached galley, and among them the corpses incombustible by fire. And along the sands and rocks, the fisher-folk were lying or standing upright in still, rigid postures, as if they had come to behold the great iceberg and had been smitten by a magic sleep. And the whole harbor-shore, and the garden of Evagh, filled with that pallid splendor, was like a place where frost has fallen thickly over all.

Feeling a great wonder, Evagh would have gone forth from his house: but, ere he had taken three steps, a numbness came upon all his members, and deep sleep overpowered his senses even where he stood.

The sun had risen when he awoke. Peering out, he beheld a new marvel: for his garden and the rocks and sea-sands below it were visible no longer, in their stead were level spaces of ice about his house,

and tall ice-pinnacles. Beyond the verges of the ice he saw a sea that lay remotely and far beneath; and beyond the sea the

low looming of a dim shore.

Terror came to Evagh now, for he recognized in all this the workings of a sorcery beyond the power of mortal wizards. Plain it was that his stout house of granite stood no longer on the coast of Mhu Thulanbut was based now on some upper crag of that stupendous iceberg he had beheld in the night. Trembling, he prayed and

knelt to the Old Ones, who dwell secretly in subterrene caverns or abide under the sea or in the supermundane spaces. And even as he prayed, he heard a loud knocking at his door.

Fearfully he arose and opened the portals. Before him were two men, strange of visage and bright-skinned, who wore for mantles such rune-enwoven stuffs as wizards wear. The runes were uncouth and alien; but when the men bespoke him he understood something of their speech, which was in a dialect of the Hyperborean isles.

"We serve that Outer One whose name is Rlim Shaikorth," they said. "From spaces beyond the north he has come in his floating citadel, the ice-mountain Yikilth, from which pours an exceeding coldness and a pale splendor that blasts the flesh of men. He has spared us alone amid the inhabitants of the isle Thulask, tempering our flesh to the rigor of his abode, making respirable for us the air no mortal man may breathe, and taking us to go with him in his sea-faring upon Yikilth. Thee also he has spared and acclimated by his spells in the coldness and thin ether. Hail, O Evagh, whom we know for a great wizard by this token: since only the mightiest of warlocks are thus chosen and exempted."

Sorely astonished was Evagh; but seeing that he had now to deal with men who were as himself, he questioned closely the two magicians of Thulask. They were named Dooni and Ux Loddhan, and were wise in the lore of the elder gods. They would tell him nothing of Rlim Shaikorth but avowed that their service to this being consisted of such worship as is given to a god, together with the repudiation of all bonds that had linked them heretofore to mankind. And they told Evagh that he was to go with them at once before Rlim Shaikorth, and perform the due rite of obeisance, and accept the bond of alienage.

So Evagh went with the Thulaskians and was led by them to a great pinnacle of ice that rose unmeltable into the sun, beetling above all its fellows. The pinnacle was hollow, and climbing therein by stairs of ice, they came at last to the chamber of Rlim Shaikorth, which was a circular dome with a round block at the center, forming a dais.

At sight of that entity which occupied the dais, Evagh's pulses were stifled for an instant by terror; and,

following upon the terror, his gorge rose within him through excess of loathing, In all the world there was nothing that could be likened for its foulness to Rlim Shaikorth. Something he had of the semblance of a fat white worm;

but his bulk was beyond that of the sea-elephant. His half-coiled tail was thick as the middle folds of his body; and his front reared upward from the dais in the form of a white round disk, and upon it were imprinted vague lineaments. Amid the visage a mouth curved unclearly from side to side of the disk, opening and shutting

incessantly on a pale and tongueless and toothless maw. Two eye sockets lay close together above the shallow nostrils, but the sockets were eyeless, and in them appeared from moment to moment globules of a blood-colored matter having the form of eyeballs; and ever the globules broke and dripped down before the dais. And from the ice-floor there ascended two masses like stalagmites, purple and dark as frozen gore, which had been made by this ceaseless dripping of the globules.

Dooni and Ux Loddhan prostrated themselves, and Evagh deemed it well to follow their example. Lying prone on the ice, he heard the red drops falling with a splash as of heavy tears; and then, in the dome above him, it seemed a voice spoke; and the voice was like the sound of some hidden cataract in a glacier hollow with caverns.

"O Evagh," said the voice, "I have preserved thee from the doom of others, and have made thee as they that inhabit the bourn of coldness and inhale the airless void: Wisdom ineffable shall be thine, and mastery beyond the conquest of mortals, if thou wilt but worship me and become my thrall. With me thou shalt voyage amid the kingdoms and isles of Earth, and see the white falling of death upon them in the light from Yikilth. Our coming shall bring eternal frost on their gardens, and shall set upon their people's flesh the rigor of trans-arctic gulfs. All this shalt thou witness, being as one of the lords of death, supernal and immortal; and in the end thou shalt return with me to that world beyond the pole, in which is mine abiding empire."

that he was without choice in the matter, Evagh professed himself willing to yield worship and service to the pale worm. Instructed by his fellow-wizards, he performed the rites that are scarce suitable for narration, and swore the vow of unspeakable alienage.

Strange was that voyaging, for it seemed that the great iceberg was guided by sorcery, prevailing ever against wind and tide. And always, as they went, the chill splendor smote afar from Yikilth. Proud galleys were overtaken, and their crews were blasted at the oars. The fair Hyperborean ports, busy with maritime traffic,

were stilled by the iceberg's passing. Idle were their streets and wharves, idle was the shipping in their harbors, when the pale light had come and gone. Far inland fell the rays, bringing to the fields and gardens a blight more lasting than that of winter; and forests were frozen, and the beasts that roamed them were turned as if into

marble, so that men who came long after to that region found the elk and bear and mammoth still standing in all the postures of life. But, sitting in his house or walking abroad on the berg, Evagh was

aware of no sharper cold than that which abides in summer shadows.

Now, besides Dooni and Ux Loddhan, there were five other wizards that went with Evagh on that voyage, having been chosen by Rlim Shaikorth and transported with their houses to the berg through unknown enchantment. They were outlandish men, called Polarians, from islands nearer the pole than broad Thulask. Evagh could understand little of their ways; and their sorcery was foreign and their speech unintelligible to him; nor was it known to the Thulaskians.

Daily the eight wizards found on their tables all provender necessary for human sustenance; though they knew not the agency that supplied it. All were seemingly united in the worship of the worm. But Evagh was uneasy at heart, beholding the doom that went forth eternally from Yikilth upon lovely cities and fruitful ocean-shore. Ruthfully he saw the blasting of flower-girdled Cerngoth, and the stillness that descended on the thronged streets of Leqqan, and the frost that seared with sudden whiteness the gardens and orchards of the sea-fronting valley of Aguil.

Ever southward sailed the great berg, bearing its lethal winter to lands where the summer sun rode high. And Evagh kept his own counsel and followed in all ways the custom of the others. At intervals that were regulated by the motions of the circumpolar stars, the warlocks climbed to that lofty chamber in which Rlim Shaikorth abode perpetually, half-coiled on his dais of ice. There, in a ritual whose cadences corresponded to the falling of those eyelike tears that were wept by the worm, and with genuflections timed to the yawning and shutting of his mouth they yielded to Rlim Shaikorth the required adoration. And Evagh learned from the others that the worm slept for a period at each darkening of the moon; and only at that time did the sanguine tears suspend their falling, and the mouth forbear its alternate closing and gaping.

At the third repetition of the rites, it came to pass that only seven wizards climbed to the tower. Evagh, counting their number, perceived that the missing man was one of the five outlanders. Later, he questioned Dooni and Ux Loddhan and made signs of inquiry to the four northrons; but it seemed that the fate of the absent warlock was a thing mysterious to all, Nothing was seen or heard of him and Evagh, pondering long and deeply, was somewhat disquieted. For, during the ceremony in the tower chamber, it had seemed to him that the worm was grosser of bulk and girth than on any former occasion;

Covertly he asked the Thulaskians what manner of nutriment was required by Rlim Shaikorth. Concerning this, there was some dispute, for Ux Loddhan maintained that the worm fed on the hearts of white arctic bears, while Dooni swore that his rightful nourishment was the liver of whales. But, to their knowledge, the worm had not eaten during their sojourn upon Yikilth.

Still the iceberg followed its course beneath the heightening sun; and again, at the star-appointed time, which was the forenoon of every third day, the sorcerers convened in the worm's presence. Their number

was now but six, and the lost warlock was another of the outlanders. And the worm had greatened still more in size, thickening visibly from head to tail.

Now, in their various tongues, the six remaining wizards implored the worm to tell them the fate of their absent fellows. And the worm answered; and his speech was intelligible to all, each thinking that he had been addressed in his own language: "This matter is a mystery, but ye shall all receive enlightenment in turn. Know this: the

two that have vanished are still present; and they and ye also shall share even as I have promised in the ultramundane lore and empery of Rlim Shaikorth."

When they had descended from the tower, Evagh and the two Thulaskians debated the interpretation of this answer. Evagh maintained that their missing companions were present only in the worm's belly; but the others argued that these men had undergone a more mystical translation and were now elevated beyond human sight

and hearing. Forthwith they began to make ready with prayer and austerity, looking for some sublime apotheosis which would come to them in due turn. But Evagh could not trust the worm's equivocal pledges; and fear and doubt remained with him.

Seeking for some trace of the lost Polarians to assuage his doubt, he made search of the mighty berg, on whose battlements his own house and the houses of the other warlocks were perched like the tiny huts of fishers on ocean cliffs; In this quest the others would not accompany him, fearing to incur the worm's displeasure. From verge to verge he roamed unhindered, and he climbed perilously on the upper scarps, and went down into deep crevasses and caverns where the sun failed and there was no other light than the strange luster of that unearthly ice. Embedded here in the walls, as if in the stone of nether strata, he saw dwellings such as men had never built, and vessels that might belong to other ages or worlds; but nowhere could he detect the presence of any living creature; and no spirit or shadow gave response to his evocations.

So Evagh was still fearful of the worm's treachery; and he resolved to remain awake on the night preceding the next celebration of the rites of worship. At eve of that night, he assured himself that the other warlocks were all housed in their separate mansions, to the number of five; and then he set himself to watch without remission

the entrance of Rlim Shaikorth's tower, which was plainly visible from his own windows.

Weirdly and coldly shone the great berg in the darkness, pouring forth a light as of frozen stars. The moon rose early on the eastern sea. But Evagh, holding vigil at his window till midnight, saw that no visible form emerged from the tower and none entered it. At midnight there came upon him a sudden drowsiness, and he could sustain his vigil no longer but slept deeply throughout the remainder of the night.

On the following day there were but four sorcerers who gathered in the ice-dome and gave homage to Rlim Shaikorth. And Evagh saw that two more of the outlanders, men of bulk and stature dwarfish beyond their fellows, were now missing.

One by one thereafter, on nights preceding the ceremony of worship; the companions of Evagh vanished. The last Polarian was next to go; and it came to pass that only Evagh and Ux Loddhan and Dooni went to the tower; and then Evagh and Ux Loddhan went alone. And terror mounted daily in Evagh, and he would have hurled himself into the sea from Yikilth, if Ux Loddhan, divining his intention, had not warned him that no man could depart therefrom and live again in solar warmth and terrene air, having been habituated to the coldness and thin ether.

So, at the time when the moon had waned and darkened wholly, it occurred that Evagh climbed before Rlim Shaikorth with infinite trepidation and loath, laggard steps. And, entering the dome with downcast eyes, he found himself the sole worshipper.

A palsy of fear was upon him as he made obeisance; and scarcely he dared to lift his eyes and regard the worm. But soon, as he began to perform the customary genuflections, he became aware that the red tears of Rlim Shaikorth no longer fell on the purple stalagmites; nor was there any sound such as the worm was wont to

make by the perpetual opening and shutting of his mouth. And venturing at last to look upward, Evagh beheld the abhorrently swollen mass of the monster, whose thickness was now such as to overhang the dais' rim; and he saw that the mouth and eyeholes were closed in slumber. Thereupon he recalled how the wizards of Thulask had told him that the worm slept for an interval at the darkening of each moon.

Now was Evagh sorely bewildered: for the rites he had learned could be fittingly performed only while the tears of Rlim Shaikorth fell down and his mouth gaped and closed and gaped again in a measured alternation. And none had instructed him as to what rites were suitable during the slumber of the worm. And being in much

doubt, he said softly: "Wakest thou, O Rlim Shaikorth?"

In reply, he seemed to hear a multitude of voices that issued obscurely from out the pale, tumid mass before him. The sound of the voices was weirdly muffled, but among them he distinguished the accents of Dooni and Ux Loddhan; and there was a thick muttering of uncouth words which he knew for the speech of the five Polarians; and beneath this he caught, or seemed to catch, innumerable undertones that were not the voices of any creatures of Earth. And the voices rose and clamored, like those of prisoners in some profound oubliette.

Anon, as he listened in awe and horror, the voice of Dooni became articulate above the others; and the manifold clamor and muttering ceased, as if a multitude were hushed to hear its spokesman. And Evagh heard the tones of Dooni, saying:

"The worm sleeps, but we whom the worm has devoured are awake. Direly has he deceived us, for he came to our houses in the night, devouring us bodily one by one as we slept under his enchantment. He has eaten our souls even as our bodies, and verily we are part of Rlim Shaikorth, but exist only as in a dark noisome dungeon; and while the worm wakes we have no separate being, but are merged wholly into the being of Rlim Shaikorth.

"Hear, then, O Evagh, the truth which we have learned from our oneness with the worm. He has saved us from the white doom and has taken us upon Yikilth for this reason, because we alone of all mankind, who are sorcerers of high attainment and mastery, may endure the lethal ice-change and become breathers of the airless void, and thus, in the end, be made suitable for his provender.

"Great and terrible is the worm, and the place where from he comes and whereto he returns is not to be dreamt of by mortal men. And the worm is omniscient, save that he knows not the waking of them he has devoured, and their awareness during his slumber. But the worm, though ancient beyond the antiquity of worlds, is not immortal and is vulnerable in one particular. Whosoever learns the time and means of his vulnerability, and has heart for the undertaking, may slay him easily. Therefore we adjure thee now by the faith of the Old Ones to draw the sword thou wearest beneath thy mantle and plunge it into the side of Rlim Shaikorth; for such is the means of his slaying.

"Thus only shall the going forth of the pale death be ended; and only thus shall we, thy fellows, obtain release from our blind thralldom and incarceration; and with us many that the worm has betrayed and eaten in former ages upon distant worlds. And only by the doing of this shalt thou escape the worm's mouth, abide henceforward as a ghost among other ghosts in his belly. But know, however, that he who slays Rlim Shaikorth must necessarily perish in the slaying."

Evagh, in great astonishment, made question of Dooni and was answered readily concerning all that he asked. Much did he learn of the worm's origin and essence, and the manner in which Yikilth had floated dawn from transpolar gulfs to voyage the seas of Earth. Ever, as he listened, his abhorrence gretened; though deeds of

dark sorcery had long indurated his flesh and soul, making him callous to more than common horrors. But of that which he learned it were ill to speak now.

At length there was silence in the dome; for Evagh had no longer any will to question the ghost of Dooni; and they that were imprisoned with Dooni seemed to wait and watch in a stillness of death.

Then, being a man of much resolution and hardihood, Evagh delayed no longer but drew from its ivory sheath the short and well-tempered sword of bronze which he carried at his baldric. Approaching close to the dais, he plunged the blade into the over-swollen mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The blade entered easily, slicing and tearing,

as if he had stabbed a monstrous bladder, and was not stayed even by the broad pommel; and the whole right hand of Evagh was drawn after it into the wound.

He perceived no quiver or stirring of the worm; but out of the wound there gushed a sudden torrent of black liquescent matter, swiftening and deepening till the sword was caught from Evagh's grasp as if in a mill-race. Hotter far than blood and smoking with strange steamy vapors, the liquid poured over his arms and splashed his raiment as it fell. Quickly the ice was awash around his feet; but still the fluid welled as if from some inexhaustible spring of foulness; and it spread everywhere in meeting pools and runlets.

Evagh would have fled then; but the sable liquid, mounting and flowing, was about his ankles when he neared the stairhead; and it rushed adown the stairway before him like a cataract. Hotter and hotter it grew, boiling bubbling, while the current strengthened and clutched at him and drew him like malignant hands. He feared to essay the downward stairs; nor was there any place in the dome where he could climb for refuge. He turned, striving against the tide for bare foothold, and saw dimly through reeking vapors the throned mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The gash had widened prodigiously, and a stream surged from it like waters of a broken weir; and yet, for further proof of the worm's unearthly nature, his bulk was in no wise diminished thereby. And still the black fluid came in an evil flood: and it rose swirling about the knees of Evagh; and the vapors seemed to take the form of myriad phantoms, wreathing and dividing obscurely as they went past him. Then, tottering giddily on the stairhead, he was swept away and hurled to his death on the ice-steps far below.

That day, on the sea to eastward of middle Hyperborea, the crews of certain merchant galleys beheld an unheard-of thing. As they sped north, returning from far ocean isles with a wind that aided their oars, they sighted in the late forenoon a monstrous iceberg whose pinnacles and crags loomed high as mountains. The berg shone in part with a weird light; and from its loftiest pinnacle poured an inkblack torrent; and all the ice-cliffs and buttresses beneath were astream with rapids and cascades and sheeted falls of the same blackness, that fumed like boiling water as they plunged oceanward; and the sea around the berg was clouded and streaked for a wide interval as if with the dark fluid of the cuttlefish.

The mariners feared to sail closer; but, full of awe and marveling, they stayed their oars and lay watching the berg; and the wind dropped, so that the galleys drifted within view of it all day. The berg dwindled swiftly, melting, as though some unknown fire consumed it; and the air took on a strange warmth between

gusts of arctic

coldness, and the water about their ships grew tepid. Crag by crag the ice was runneled and eaten away; and huge portions fell off with a mighty splashing; and the highest pinnacle collapsed; but still the blackness poured out as from an unfathomable fountain. The watchers thought, at whiles, that they beheld houses ruining seaward amid the loosened fragments; but of this they were uncertain because of those ever-mounting vapors. By sunset-time the berg had diminished to a mass no larger than a common floe; yet still the welling blackness overstreamed it; and it sank low in the waves; and the weird light was quenched altogether. Thereafter, the night being moonless, it was lost to vision. A gale rose, blowing strongly from the south; and at dawn the sea was void of any remnant.

Concerning the matters related above, many and various legends have gone forth throughout Mhu Thulan and all the hyperboreal kingdoms and archipelagoes. The truth is not in such tales, for no man has known the truth heretofore. But I, the sorcerer Eibon, calling up through my necromancy the wave-wandering spirit of Evagh, have learned from him the true history of the worm's advent. And I have written it down in my volume with such omissions as are needful for the sparing of mortal weakness and sanity. And men will read this record, together with much more of the elder lore, in days long after the coming and melting of the great glacier.