



A LANCER BOOK

CONAN OF CIMMERIA

Copyright © 1969 by L. Sprague de Camp. All rights reserved Printed in the U.S.A.

The Curse of the Monolith was first published under the title Conan and «he Cenotaph in *Worlds of Fantasy*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1968; copyright © 1968 by Galaxy Publishing Corp.

The Bloodstained God was rewritten by L. Sprague de Camp from an original story by Robert E. Howard called The Trail of the Blood-Stained God, laid in modern Afghanistan. It was first published in *Tales of Conan*, by Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp, Gnome Press, Inc.; copyright © 1955 by Gnome Press, Inc.

The Frost Giant's Daughter was first published in slightly different form under the title Gods of the North in the fantasy fan for March, 1934; it was reprinted in this form in *Fantastic Universe Science Fiction* for December, 1956. Revised by Robert E. Howard and later by L. Sprague de Camp, it was reprinted under its present title in *Fantasy Fiction* for August, 1953; copyright © 1953 by Future Publications, Inc., and in *The Coming of Conan*, by Robert E. Howard, Gnome Press, Inc., 1953. The Lair of the Ice Worm is published here for the first time. Queen of the Black Coast was first published in *Weird Tales* for May, 1934; copyright © 1934 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co.; it was reprinted in *Avon Fantasy Reader No. 8*, 1948 and in *The Coming of Conan*. The Vale of Lost Women was first published in *Magazine of Horror No. 15* for Spring, 1967; copyright © 1967 by Health Knowledge, Inc. The Castle of Terror is published here for the first time. The Snout in the Dark, rewritten by L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter from an outline and the first half of the rough draft of a story by Robert E. Howard, is published here for the first time.

The biographical paragraphs between the stories are based upon A Probable Outline of Conan's Career by P. Schuyler Miller and Dr. John D. Clark, published in *The Hyborian Age*, 1938, and on the expanded version of this essay, An Informal Biography of Conan the Cimmerian, by P. Schuyler Miller, Dr. John D. Clark and L. Sprague de Camp, published in *Amra*, Vol. 2, No. 4; copyright © 1959 by G. H. Scithers; used by permission of G. H. Scithers.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

CONTENTS

Introduction (de Camp)

The Curse of the Monolith (de Camp & Carter)	15
The Bloodstained God (Howard & de Camp)	33
The Frost Giant's Daughter (Howard)	53
The Lair of the Ice Worm (de Camp & Carter)	64
Queen of the Black Coast (Howard)	82
The Vale of Lost Women (Howard)	119
The Castle of Terror (de Camp & Carter)	140
The Snout in the Dark (Howard, de Camp, & Carter)	181

Pages 6 and 7: A map of the world of Conan in the Hyborian Age, based upon notes and sketches by Robert E. Howard and upon previous maps by P. Schuyler Miller, John D. Clark, David Kyle, and L. Sprague de Camp, with a map of Europe and adjacent regions superimposed for reference.

Introduction

Robert Ervin Howard (1906-36) was born in Peaster, Texas, and lived most of his life in Cross Plains, in the center of Texas between Abilene and Brownwood. During his last decade, this prolific and versatile writer turned out a large volume of what was then called "pulp fiction"—sport, detective, western, historical, adventure, weird, and ghost stories, as well as his many stories of adventure fan-tasy. Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert W. Chambers, Harold Lamb, Talbot Mundy, Jack London, and H. P. Lovecraft (of whom he was a pen pal) all influenced him. At the age of thirty, he ended a promising literary career by suicide.

Howard's adventure fantasies belong to a kind of fiction called heroic fantasy, or sometimes swordplay-and-sorcery stories. Such stories are laid in a world not as it is or was but as it ought to have been. The setting may be the world as it is conceived to have been long ago, or as it will be in the distant future, or on another planet, or in another dimension. In such a world, magic works and spirits are real, but modern science and technology are essentially unknown. Either they have not yet been discovered, or they have been forgotten. Men are mighty, women are beautiful, problems are simple, and life is ad-venturous.

When well done, such tales furnish the purest *fun* to

9

be found in modern fiction. They are designed primarily to entertain, not to educate, uplift, or convert to some faith or ideology. They derive ultimately from the myths, legends, and epics of ancient times and primitive peoples. 'After several centuries of neglect, William Morris revived the genre in England in the 1880s. Early in this century, Lord Dunsany and Eric R. Eddison made further contributions to the field. A notable recent addition to it has been the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien.

The appearance of the American magazines *Weird Tales* in 1923 and *Unknown Worlds* in 1939 created new markets for heroic fantasy, and many notable stories in the genre were published. Among these, Howard's tales were outstanding. Howard wrote several series of heroic fantasies, most of them published in *Weird Tales*. Of these, the longest and most popular series comprised the Conan stories. Eighteen Conan stories were published in Howard's lifetime. Eight others, from complete manuscripts to mere fragments and outlines, have been discovered among Howard's papers since 1950.

Late in 1951, I stumbled upon a cache of Howard's manuscripts in the apartment of the then literary agent for Howard's estate. These included a few unpublished Conan stories, which I edited for publication. Other manuscripts have been found in more recent years by Glenn Lord, literary agent for the Howard estate, in collections of Howard's papers.

The incomplete state of the Conan saga has tempted me and others to add to it, as Howard might have done had he lived. In the early 1950s, I rewrote the manuscripts of four of Howard's unpublished adventure stories, with medieval or modern settings, to turn them into Conan stories. More recently, my colleagues Bjorn Nyberg and Lin Carter have collaborated with me in the completion of the stories that Howard left unfinished and in the composition of pastiches, based upon hints

10

in Howard's notes and letters, to fill the gaps in the saga. The reader must judge how successful our posthumous collaboration with Howard had been.

During the past three years, Lancer Books has been engaged in the publication of the complete Conan saga—Howard's original stories, the stories begun by him and finished by other hands, and the pastiches—all in chronological order to give a coherent biography of our hero. Because of legal complications, it was not possible to issue the volumes in chronological order. Thus this, the tenth volume to be published, is actually the second volume in chronological order, following *Conan* and preceding *Conan the Freebooter*. The ten volumes now in print include all the Conan stories by Howard—those completed by him and those finished by Carter or by me. At present, two more volumes of pastiche are planned to fill the remaining gaps. One, *inshallah*, will deal with Conan's career as a captain of the Zingaran buccaneers; the other, with his later years as king of Aquilonia.

Before he undertook the writing of the Conan stories, Howard constructed a pseudo-history of Conan's world, with the geography, ethnography, and political units clearly worked out. It is partly the concreteness of Howard's imaginary world that gives his stories their vividness and fascination—his sharp, gorgeous, consistent vision of "a purple and golden and crimson universe where anything can happen—except the tedious." He incorporated this plan in a long essay, "The Hyborian Age," which is printed in two parts in the volumes *Conan* and *Conan the Avenger* of this series.

According to Howard's scheme, Conan lived, loved, and plunged into his desperate adventures about twelve thousand years ago, eight thousand years after the sinking of Atlantis and seven thousand before the beginnings of recorded history.

In this time (according to Howard) the western parts of the main continent of the Eastern Hemisphere were occupied by the Hyborian kingdoms. These comprised a galaxy of states set up by northern invaders, the Hyborians, three thousand years earlier on the ruins of the evil empire of Acheron. South of the Hyborian kingdoms lay the quarreling city-states of Shem. Beyond Shem slumbered the ancient, sinister kingdom of Stygia, the rival and partner of Acheron in the days of the latter's blood-stained glory. Further south yet, beyond deserts and veldts, were barbarous black kingdoms. North of the Hyborians lay the barbarian lands of Cimmeria, Hyperborea, Vanaheim, and Asgard. West, along the ocean, were the fierce, savage Picts. To the east glittered the Hyrkanian kingdoms, of which the mightiest was Turan.

About 500 years after the time of Conan the Great, most of these realms were swept away by barbarian invasions and migrations. After some centuries during which the earth supported a drastically shrunken population of wandering, quarreling barbarians, civilization—what was left of it—was further overwhelmed by the last advance of the glaciers from the poles and by a convulsion of nature like that which had previously destroyed Atlantis. At this time, the North and Mediterranean Seas were formed, the great inland Vilayet Sea shrank to the dimensions of the present Caspian, and vast areas of West Africa arose from beneath the waves of the Atlantic. Mankind sank to the most primitive savagery. After the retreat of the ice of this glaciation, civilization again re-lived and recorded history began.

Conan was a gigantic barbarian adventurer who roistered, brawled, and battled his way across half the pre-historic world, to rise at last to the throne of a mighty realm. The son of a blacksmith in the bleak, backward northern country of Cimmeria, Conan was born on a battlefield in that land of rugged hills and somber skies.

As a youth, he took part in the sack of the Aquilonian frontier settlement of Venarium.

Later, joining a band of *AEsir* in a raid into Hyperborea, Conan was captured by the Hyperboreans. Escaping from the Hyperborean slave pen, he wandered south into the kingdom of Zamora. For several years he made a precarious living there and in the adjacent lands of Corinthia and Nemedia as a thief. (See map, pages 6 and 7.) Green to civilization and quite lawless by nature, he made up for his lack of subtlety and sophistication by natural shrewdness and by the herculean physique he had inherited from his father.

Tiring of this starveling existence, Conan enlisted as a mercenary soldier in the armies of Turan. For the next two years he traveled widely, as far east as the fabled lands of Meru and Khitai. He also refined his archery and horsemanship, both of which had been at best indifferent up to the time of his joining the Turanians. It is during the later part of his Turanian service that the present volume begins.

Readers who would like to know more about Conan, Robert E. Howard, or heroic fantasy in general are referred to the other volumes of this series (listed in chronological order on the page before the title page of this volume) and to two periodicals and one book. One periodical is *Amra*, published by George H. Scithers, Box 9120, Chicago, 111., 60690. This is the organ of the Hyborian Legion, a loose group of admirers of heroic fantasy and of the Conan stories in particular. The other periodical is *The Howard Collector*, published by Glenn Lord, literary agent for the Howard estate, Box 775, Pasadena, Tex., 77501. This is devoted to articles, stories, and poems by and about Howard.

The book is *The Conan Reader*, by the present writer, published by Jack L. Chalker, 5111 Liberty Heights Ave.,

Baltimore, Md., 21207. This consists of articles on Howard, Conan, and heroic fantasy previously published in *Amra*. I have also listed many works by Howard, currently available, in my introduction to the volume *Conan* of the present series. For those who wish to try heroic fantasy by other authors, besides the Tolkien trilogy and the various works by Lin Carter and myself, a number of excellent stories of this type are available in paperback form. These include the books by Jane Gaskell (three novels of Atlantis), John Jakes (*Brak the Barbarian*), Fritz Leiber (three books about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser), Michael Moorcock (the four-volume *History of the Runestaff*, Lancer Books), Andre Norton (six "Witch World" novels), Fletcher Pratt (*The Well of the Unicorn*, Lancer Books), and Jack Vance (two collections of "Dying Earth" stories). I hope you have half the fun out of them that I have had.

L. Sprague de Camp

The Bloodstained God

Conan continues his service as a soldier of Turan for a total period of about two years, traveling widely and learning the elements of organized warfare. As usual, trouble is his bedfellow. After one of his more unruly episodes—said to have involved the mistress of the commander of the cavalry division in which he was serving—Conan finds it expedient to desert from the Turanian army. Rumors of treasure send him seeking for loot in the Kezankian Mountains, along the eastern borders of Zamora.

it was dark as the Pit in that stinking alley down which Conan of Cimmeria groped on a quest as blind as the darkness around him. Had there been anyone to witness, they would have seen a tall and enormously powerful man clad in a flowing Zuagir khilat, over that a mail shirt of fine steel mesh, and over that a Zuagir cloak of camel's hair. His mane of

black hair and his broad, somber, youth-ful face, bronzed by the desert sun, were hidden by the Zuagir kaffia.

A sharp, pain-edged cry smote his ears.

Such cries were not uncommon in the twisting alleys of Arenjun, the City of Thieves, and no cautious or timid man would think of interfering in an affair that was none of his business. But Conan was neither cautious nor timid. His ever-lively curiosity would not let him pass by a cry for help; besides, he was searching for certain men, and the disturbance might be a clue to their whereabouts.

3

Obedying his quick barbarian instincts, he turned toward a beam of light that lanced the darkness close at hand. An instant later he peered through a crack in the close-drawn shutters of a window in a thick stone wall.

He was looking into a spacious room hung with velvet tapestries and littered with costly rugs and couches. About one of these couches a group of men clustered—six brawny Zamorian bravos and two more who eluded identification. On that couch another man was stretched out, a Kezan-kian tribesman naked to the waist. Though he was a powerful man, a ruffian as muscular as himself gripped each wrist and ankle. Between the four of them they had him spread-eagled on the couch, unable to move, though the muscles stood out in quivering knots on his limbs and shoulders. His eyes gleamed redly and his broad chest glistened with sweat. As Conan looked, a supple man in a turban of red silk lifted a glowing coal from a smoking brazier with a pair of tongs and poised it over the quivering breast, already scarred from similar torture. Another man, taller than the one with the red turban, snarled a question Conan could not understand. The Kezankian shook his head violently and spat savagely at the questioner. The red-hot coal dropped full on the hairy breast, wrenching an inhuman bellow from the sufferer. In that instant Conan launched his full weight against the shutters.

The Cimmerian's action was not so impulsive as it looked. For his present purposes he needed a friend among the hillmen of the Kezankian range, a people notoriously hostile to all strangers. And here was a chance to get one. The shutters splintered inward with a crash, and he hit the floor inside feet-first, scimitar in one hand and Zuagir sword-knife in the other. The torturers whirled and yelped in astonishment.

They saw a tall, massive figure clad in the garments of a Zuagir, with a fold of his flowing kaffia drawn about his

34

face. Over his mask his eyes blazed a volcanic blue. For an instant the scene held, frozen, then melted into ferocious action.

The man in the red turban snapped a quick word, and a hairy giant lunged to meet the oncoming intruder. The Zamorian held a three-foot sword low, and as he charged he ripped murderously upward. But the down-lashing scimitar met the rising wrist. The hand, still gripping the knife, flew from that wrist in a shower of blood, and the long narrow blade in Conan's left hand sliced through the man's throat, choking the grunt of agony.

Over the crumpling corpse the Cimmerian leaped at Red Turban and his tall companion. Red Turban drew a knife, the tall man a saber.

"Cut him down, Jillad!" snarled Red Turban, retreating before the Cimmerian's impetuous onslaught. "Zal, help here!"

The man called Jillad parried Conan's slash and cut back. Conan avoided the swipe with a shift that would have shamed the leap of a starving panther, and the same movement brought him within reach of Red Turban's knife. The knife shot out; the point struck Conan's side but failed to pierce the shirt of black ring mail. Red Turban leaped back, so narrowly avoiding Conan's knife that the lean blade slit his silken vest and the skin beneath. He tripped over a stool and fell sprawling, but before Conan could follow up his advantage, Jillad was pressing him, raining blows with his saber.

As he parried, the Cimmerian saw that the man called Zal was advancing with a heavy poleax, while Red Turban was scrambling to his feet.

Conan did not wait to be surrounded. A swipe of his scimitar drove Jillad back on his heels. Then, as Zal raised the poleax, Conan darted in under the blow, and the next instant Zal was down, writhing in his own blood and entrails. Conan leaped for the men who still gripped

35

the prisoner. They let go of the man, shouting and drawing their tulwars. One struck at the Kezankian, who evaded the blow by rolling off the bench. Then Conan was between him and them. He retreated before their blows, snarling at the Kezankian:

"Get out! Ahead of me! Quickly!"

"Dogs!" screamed Red Turban. "Don't let them escape!"

"Come and taste of death yourself, dog!" Conan laughed wildly, speaking Zamorian with a barbarous accent.

The Kezankian, weak from torture, slid back a bolt and threw open a door giving upon a small court. He stumbled across the court while behind him Conan faced his tormentors in the doorway, where in the confined space their very numbers hindered them. He laughed and cursed them as he parried and thrust. Red Turban was dancing behind the mob, shrieking curses. Conan's scimitar licked out like the tongue of a cobra, and a Zamorian shrieked and fell, clutching his belly. Jillad, lunging, tripped over him and fell. Before the cursing, squirming figures that jammed the doorway could untangle themselves, Conan turned and ran across the yard toward a wall over which the Kezankian had already disappeared.

Sheathing his weapons, Conan leaped and caught the coping, swung himself up, and had one glimpse of the black,

winding street outside. Then something smashed against his head, and limply he toppled from the wall into the shadowy street below.

The tiny glow of a taper in his face roused Conan. He sat up, blinking and cursing, and groped for his sword. Then the light was blown out and a voice spoke in the darkness:

"Be at ease, Conan of Cimmeria. I am your friend." "Who in Crom's name are you?" demanded Conan. He

36

had found his scimitar on the ground nearby, and he stealthily gathered his legs under him for a spring. He was in the street at the foot of the wall from which he had fallen, and the other man was but a dim bulk looming over him in the starlight.

"Your friend," repeated the other in a soft Iranistanian accent. "Call me Sassan."

Conan rose, scimitar in hand. The Iranistani extended something toward him. Conan caught the glint of steel in the starlight, but before he could strike he saw that it was his own knife, hilt first.

"You're as suspicious as a starving wolf, Conan," laughed Sassan. "But save your steel for your enemies."

"Where are they?" Conan took the knife.

"Gone. Into the mountains, on the trail of the blood-stained god."

Conan started and caught Sassan's khilat in an iron grip and glared into the man's dark eyes, mocking and mysterious in the starlight.

"Damn you, what know you of the bloodstained god?" Conan's knife touched the Iranistani's side below his ribs.

"I know this," said Sassan. "You came to Arenjun following thieves who stole from you the map of a treasure-greater than Yildiz's hoard. I, too, came seeking something. I was hiding nearby, watching through a hole in the wall, when you burst into the room where the Ke-zankian was being tortured. How did you know it was they who stole your map?"

"I didn't," muttered Conan. "I heard a man cry out and thought it a good idea to interfere. If I had known they were the men I sought . . . how much do you know?"

"This much. Hidden in the mountains near here is an ancient temple which the hill folk fear to enter. It is said to go back to Pre-Cataclysmic times, though the wise

37

men disagree as to whether it is Grondarian or was built by the unknown pre-human folk who ruled the Hyrkans just after the Cataclysm.

"The Kezankians forbid the region to all outsiders, but a Nemedian named Ostorio did find the temple. He entered it and discovered a golden idol crusted with red jewels, which he called the bloodstained god. He could not bring it away with him, as it was bigger than a man, but he made a map, intending to return. Although he got safely away, he was stabbed by some ruffian in Shadi-zar and died there. Before he died he gave the map to you, Conan."

"Well?" demanded Conan grimly. The house behind him was dark and still.

"The map was stolen," said Sassan. "By whom, you know."

"I didn't know at the time," growled Conan. "Later I learned the thieves were Zyrras, a Corinthian, and Arshak, a disinherited Turanian prince. Some skulking servant spied on Ostorio as he lay dying and told them. Though I knew neither by sight, I traced them to this city. To-night I learned they were hiding in this alley. I was blundering about looking for a clue when I stumbled into that brawl."

"You fought them in ignorance!" said Sassan. "The Kezankian was Rustum, a spy of the Kezankian chieftain Keraspa. They lured him into their house and were singing him to make him tell them of the secret trails through the mountains. You know the rest."

"All except what happened when I climbed the wall."

"Somebody threw a stool at you and hit your head. When you fell outside the wall they paid you no more heed, either thinking you were dead or not knowing you in your mask. They chased the Kezankian, but whether they caught him I know not. Soon they returned, sad-dled up, and rode like madmen westward, leaving the

38

dead where they fell. I came to see who you were and recognized you."

"Then the man in the red turban was Arshak," muttered Conan. "But where was Zyrras?"

"Disguised as a Turanian—the man they called Jillad."

"Oh. Well then?" growled Conan.

"Take you, I want the red god, even though of all the men who have sought it down the centuries only Ostorio escaped with his life. There is supposed to be some mysterious curse on would-be plunderers—"

"What know you of that?" said Conan, sharply.

Sassan shrugged. "Nothing much. The folk of Kezan-kia speak of a doom that the god inflicts on those who raise covetous hands against him, but I'm no superstitious fool. You're not afraid, are you?"

"Of course not!" As a matter of fact Conan was. Though he feared no man or beast, the supernatural filled his barbarian's mind with atavistic terrors. Still, he did not care to admit the fact. "What have you in mind?"

"Why, only that neither of us can fight Zyrras' whole band alone, but together we can follow them and take the idol from them. What do you say?"

"Aye, I'll do it. But I'll kill you like a dog if you try any tricks!"

Sassan laughed. "I know you would, so you can trust me. Come; I have horses waiting."

The Iranistani led the way through twisting streets overhung with latticed balconies and along stinking alleys until he stopped at the lamplit door of a courtyard. At his knock, a bearded face appeared at the wicket. After some muttered words, the gate opened. Sassan strode in, Conan following suspiciously. But the horses were there, and a word from the keeper of the serai set sleepy serv-ants to saddling them and filling the saddle pouches with food.

Soon Conan and Sassan were riding together out of

39

the west gate, perfunctorily challenged by the sleepy guard. Sassan was portly but muscular, with a broad, shrewd face and dark, alert eyes. He bore a horseman's lance over his shoulder and handled his weapons with the expert-ness of practice. Conan did not doubt that in a pinch he would fight with cunning and courage. Conan also did not doubt that he could trust Sassan to play fair just so long as the alliance was to his advantage, and to murder his partner at the first opportunity when it became expedient to do so in order to keep all the treas-ure himself.

Dawn found them riding through the rugged defiles of the bare, brown, rocky Kezankian Mountains, separating the easternmost marches of Koth and Zamora from the Turanian steppes. Though both Koth and Zamora claimed the region, neither had been able to subdue it, and the town of Arenjun, perched on a steep-sided hill, had suc-cessfully withstood two sieges by the Turanian hordes from the east. The road branched and became fainter until Sassan confessed himself at a loss to know where they were.

"I'm still following their tracks," grunted Conan. "If you cannot see them, I can."

Hours passed, and signs of the recent passage of horses became clear. Conan said: "We're closing on them, and they still outnumber us. Let us stay out of sight until they get the idol, then ambush them and take it from them."

Sassan's eyes gleamed. "Good! But let's be wary; this is the country of Keraspa, who robs all he catches."

Midafternoon found them still following the trace of an ancient, forgotten road. As they rode toward a narrow gorge, Sassan said:

"If that Kezankian got back to Keraspa, the Kezankians will be alert for strangers . . ."

40

They reined up as a lean, hawk-faced Kezankian rode out of the gorge with hand upraised. "Halt!" he cried. "By what leave do you ride in the land of Keraspa?"

"Careful," muttered Conan. "They may be all around us."

"Keraspa claims toll on travelers," answered Sassan un-der his breath. "Maybe that is all this fellow wants." Fumbling in his girdle, he said to the tribesman: "We are but poor travelers, glad to pay your brave chief's toll, We ride alone."

"Then who is that behind you?" demanded the Ke-zankian, nodding his head in the direction from which they had come.

Sassan half turned his head. Instantly the Kezankian whipped a dagger from his girdle and struck at the Irani-stani.

Quick as he was, Conan was quicker. As the dagger darted at Sassan's throat, Conan's scimitar flashed and steel rang. The dagger whirled away, and with a snarl the Kezankian caught at his sword. Before he could pull the blade free, Conan struck again, cleaving turban and skull. The Kezankian's horse neighed and reared, throwing the corpse headlong. Conan wrenched his own steed around.

"Ride for the gorge!" he yelled. "It's an ambush!"

As the Kezankian tumbled to earth, there came the flat snap of bows and the whistle of arrows. Sassan's horse leaped as an arrow struck it in the neck and bolted for the mouth of the defile. Conan felt an arrow tug at his sleeve as he struck in the spurs and fled after Sassan, who was unable to control his beast.

As they swept towards the mouth of the gorge, three horsemen rode out swinging broad-bladed tulwars. Sas-san, abandoning his effort to check his maddened mount, drove his lance at the nearest. The spear transfixed the man and hurled him out of the saddle.

The next instant Conan was even with a second swords-

41

man, who swung the heavy tulwar. The Cimmerian threw up his scimitar and the blades met with a crash as the horses came together breast to breast. Conan, rising in his stirrups, smote downwards with all his immense strength, bearing down the tulwar and splitting the skull of the wielder. Then he was galloping up the gorge with arrows screeching past him. Sassan's wounded horse stum-bled and went down; the Iranistani leaped clear as it fell.

Conan pulled up, snarling: "Get up behind me!" Sas-san, lance in hand, leaped up behind the saddle. A touch of the spurs, and the heavily-burdened horse set off down the gorge. Yells behind showed that the tribesmen were scampering to their hidden horses. A turn in the gorge muffled the noises.

"That Kezankian spy must have gotten back to Ker-aspa," panted Sassan. "They want blood, not gold. Do you suppose they have wiped out Zyras?"

"He might have passed before they set up their am-bush, or they might have been following him when they turned to trap us. I think he's still ahead of us."

A mile further on they heard faint sounds of pursuit. Then they came out into a natural bowl walled by sheer cliffs. From the midst of this bowl a slope led up to a bottleneck pass on the other side. As they neared this pass, Conan saw that a low stone wall closed the gut of the pass. Sassan yelled and jumped down from the horse as a flight of arrows screeched past. One struck the horse in the chest.

The beast lurched to a thundering fall, and Conan jumped clear and rolled behind a cluster of rocks, where Sassan

had already taken cover. More arrows splintered against boulders or stuck quivering in the earth. The two adventurers looked at each other with sardonic humor.

"We've found Zyras!" said Sassan.

"In an instant," laughed Conan, "they'll rush us, and Keraspa will come up beehind us to close the trap."

42

A taunting voice shouted: "Come out and get shot, curs! "Who's the Zuagir with you, Sassan? I thought I had brained him last night!"

"My name is Conan," roared the Cimmerian.

After a moment of silence, Zyras shouted: "I might have known! Well, we have you now!"

"You're in the same fix!" yelled Conan. "You heard the fighting back down the gorge?"

"Aye; we heard it when we stopped to water the horses. Who's chasing you?"

"Keraspa and a hundred Kezankians! When we are dead, do you think he'll let you go after you tortured one of his men?"

"You had better let us join you," added Sassan.

"Is that the truth?" yelled Zyras, his turbaned head appearing over the wall.

"Are you deaf, man?" reported Conan.

The gorge reverberated with yells and hoofbeats.

"Get in, quickly!" shouted Zyras. "Time enough to di-vide the idol if we get out of this alive."

Conan and Sassan leaped up and ran up the slope to the wall, where hairy arms helped them over. Conan looked at his new allies: Zyras, grim and hard-eyed in his Tu-ranian guise; Arshak, still dapper after leagues of riding; and three swarthy Zamorians who bared their teeth in greeting. Zyras and Arshak each wore a shirt of chain mail like those of Conan and Sassan.

The Kezankians, about a score of them, reined up as the bows of the Zamorians and Arshak sent arrows swish-ing among them. Some of them shot back; others whirled and rode back out of range to dismount, as the wall was too high to be carried by a mounted charge. One saddle was emptied and one wounded horse bolted back down the gorge with its rider.

"They must have been following us," snarled Zyras. "Conan, you lied! That is no hundred men!"

43

"Enough to cut our throats," said Conan, trying his sword. "And Keraspa can send for reinforcements when-ever he likes."

Zyras growled: "We have a chance behind this wall. I believe it was built by the same race that built the red god's temple. Save your arrows for the rush."

Covered by a continuous discharge of arrows from four of their number on the flanks, the rest of the Kezankians ran up the slope in a solid mass, those in front holding up light bucklers. Behind them Conan saw Keraspa's red beard as the wily chief urged his men on.

"Shoot!" screamed Zyras. Arrows plunged into the mass of men and three writhing figures were left behind on the slope, but the rest came on, eyes glaring and blades glit-tering in hairy fists.

The defenders shot their last arrows into the mass and then rose up behind the wall, drawing steel. The moun-taineers rolled up against the wall. Some tried to boost their fellows up to the top; others pushed small boulders up against the foot of the wall to provide steps. Along the barrier sounded the smash of bone-breaking blows, the rasp and slither of steel, the gasping oaths of dying men. Conan hewed the head from the body of a Kezan-kian, and beside him saw Sassan thrust his spear into the open mouth of another until the point came out the back of the man's neck. A wild-eyed tribesman stabbed a long knife into the belly of one of the Zamorians. Into the gap left by the falling body the howling Kezankian lunged, hurling himself up and over the wall before Co-nan could stop him. The giant Cimmerian took a cut on his left arm and crushed in the man's shoulder with a return blow.

Leaping over the body, he hewed into the men swarm-ing up over the wall with no time to see how the fight was going on either side. Zyras was cursing in Corinthian and Arshak in Hyrkanian. Somebody screamed in mortal

44

agony. A tribesman got a pair of gorilla-like hands on Conan's thick neck, but the Cimmerian tensed his neck muscles and stabbed low with his knife again and again until with a moan the Kezankian released him and top-pled from the wall.

Gasping for air, Conan looked about him, realizing that the pressure had slackened. The few remaining Ke-zankians were staggering down the slope, all streaming blood. Corpses lay piled deep at the foot of the wall. All three of the Zamorians were dead or dying, and Conan saw Arshak sitting with his back against the wall, his hands pressed to his body while blood seeped between his fingers. The prince's lips were blue, but he achieved a ghastly smile.

"Born in a palace," he whispered, "and dying behind a rock wall! No matter—it is fate. There is a curse on the treasure—all men who rode on the trail of the blood stained god have died . . ." And he died.

Zyras, Conan, and Sassan glanced silently at one an-other: three grim tattered figures, all splashed with blood. All had taken minor wounds on their limbs; but their mail shirts had saved them from the death that had be-fallen their companions.

"I saw Keraspa sneaking off!" snarled Zyras. "He'll make for his village and get the whole tribe on our trail. Let us make a race of it: get the idol and drag it out of the mountains before he catches us. There's enough treas-ure for all."

"True," growled Conan. "But give me back my map before we start."

Zyras opened his mouth to speak, and then saw that Sassan had picked up one of the Zamorians' bows and had drawn an arrow on him. "Do as Conan tells you," said the Iranistani.

Zyras shrugged and handed over a crumpled parchment. "Curse you, I still deserve a third of the treasure!"

45

Conan glanced at the map and thrust it into his girdle. "All right; I'll not hold a grudge. You're a swine, but if you play fair with us we'll do the same, eh, Sassan?"

Sassan nodded and gathered up a quiverful of arrows.

The horses of Zyras' party were tied in the pass behind the wall. The three men mounted the best beasts and led the three others, up the canyon behind the pass. Night fell, but with Keraspa behind them they pushed recklessly on.

Conan watched his companions like a hawk. The most dangerous time would come when they had secured the golden statue and no longer needed each other's help. Then Zyras and Sassan might conspire to murder Conan, or one of them might approach him with a plan to slay the third man. Tough and ruthless though the Cim-merian was, his barbaric code of honor would not let him be the first to try treachery.

He also wondered what it was that the maker of the map had tried to tell him just before he died. Death had come upon Ostorio in the midst of a description of the temple, with a gush of blood from his mouth. The Ne-median had been about to warn him of something, he thought—but of what?

Dawn broke as they came out of a narrow gorge into a steep-walled valley. The defile through which they had entered was the only way in. It came out upon a ledge thirty paces wide, with the cliff rising a bowshot above it on one side and falling away to an unmeasurable depth below. There seemed no way down into the mist-veiled depths of the valley far below. The men wasted few glances in this direction, for the sight ahead drove hunger and fatigue from their minds.

There on the ledge stood the temple, gleaming in the rising sun. It was carved out of the sheer rock of the

46

cliff, its great portico facing them. The ledge led to its great bronzen door, green with age.

What race or culture it represented Conan did not try to guess. He unfolded the map and glanced at the notes on the margin, trying to discover a method of opening the door.

But Sassan slipped from his saddle and ran ahead of them, crying out in his greed.

"Fool!" grunted Zyras, swinging down from his horse. "Ostorio left a warning on the margin of the map; something about the god's taking his toll."

Sassan was pulling at the various ornaments and projections on the portal. They heard him cry out in triumph as it moved under his hands. Then his cry changed to a scream as the door, a ton of bronze, swayed outward and fell crashing, squashing the Iranistani like an insect. He was completely hidden by the great metal slab, from beneath which oozed streams of crimson.

Zyras shrugged. "I said he was a fool. Ostorio must have found some way to swing the door without releasing it from its hinges."

One less knife in the back to watch for, thought Conan. "Those hinges are false," he said, examining the mechanism at close range. "Ho! The door is rising back up again!"

The hinges were, as Conan had said, fakes. The door was actually mounted on a pair of swivels at the lower corners so that it could fall outward like a drawbridge. From each upper corner of the door a chain ran diagonally up, to disappear into a hole near the upper corner of the door-frame. Now, with a distant grinding sound, the chains had tautened and had started to pull the door back up into its former position.

Conan snatched up the lance that Sassan had dropped. Placing the butt in a hollow in the carvings of the inner

47

surface of the door, he wedged the point into the corner of the door frame. The grinding sound ceased and the door stopped moving in a nine-tenths open position.

"That was clever, Conan," said Zyras. "As the god has now had his toll, the way should be open."

He stepped up on to the inner surface of the door and strode into the temple. Conan followed. They paused on the threshold and peered into the shadowy interior as they might have peered into a serpent's lair. Silence held the ancient temple, broken only by the soft scuff of their boots.

They entered cautiously, blinking in the half-gloom. In the dimness, a blaze of crimson like the glow of a sunset smote their eyes. They saw the god, a thing of gold crusted with flaming gems.

The statue, a little bigger than life size, was in the form of a dwarfish man standing upright on great splay feet on a block of basalt. The statue faced the entrance, and on each side of it stood a great carved chair of dense black wood, inlaid with gems and mother-of-pearl in a style unlike that of any living nation.

To the left of the statue, a few feet from the base of the pedestal, the floor of the temple was cleft from wall to wall by a chasm some fifteen feet wide. At some time, probably before the temple had been built, an earthquake had split the rock. Into that black abyss, ages ago, screaming victims had doubtless been hurled by hideous priests as sacrifices to the god. The walls were lofty and fantastically carved, the roof dim and shadowy above.

But the attention of the men was fixed on the idol. Though a brutish and repellant monstrosity, it represented wealth that made Conan's brain swim.

"Crom and Ymir!" breathed Conan. "One could buy a kingdom with those rubies!"

"Too much to share with a lout of a barbarian," panted Zyras.

48

These words, spoken half-unconsciously between the Corinthian's clenched teeth, warned Conan. He ducked just as Zyras' sword whistled towards his neck; the blade sliced a fold from his headdress. Cursing his own carelessness, Conan leaped back and drew his scimitar,

Zyras came on in a rush and Conan met him. Back and forth they fought before the leering idol, feet scuffing on the rock, blades rasping and ringing. Conan was larger than the Corinthian, but Zyras was strong, agile, and experienced, full of deadly tricks. Again and again Conan dodged death by a hair's breadth.

Then Conan's foot slipped on the smooth floor and his blade wavered. Zyras threw all his strength and speed into a lunge that would have driven his saber through Conan. But the Cimmerian was not so off balance as he looked. With the suppleness of a panther, he twisted his powerful body aside so that the long blade passed under his right armpit, plowing through his loose khilat. For an instant, the blade caught in the cloth. Zyras stabbed with the dagger in his left hand. The blade sank into Conan's right arm, and at the same time the knife in Conan's left drove through Zyras' mail shirt, snapping the links, and plunged between Zyras' ribs. Zyras screamed, gurgled, reeled back, and fell limply.

Conan dropped his weapons and knelt, ripping a strip of cloth from his robe for a bandage, to add to those he already wore. He bound up the wound, tying knots with fingers and teeth, and glanced at the bloodstained god leering down at him. Its gargoyle face seemed to gloat. Conan shivered as the superstitious fears of the barbarian ran down his spine.

Then he braced himself. The red god was his, but the problem was, how to get the thing away? If it were solid it would be much too heavy to move, but a tap of the butt of his knife assured him that it was hollow. He was pacing about, his head full of schemes for knocking one

49

of the carved thrones apart to make a sledge, levering the god off its base, and hauling it out of the temple by means of the extra horses and the chains that worked the falling front door, when a voice made him whirl.

"Stand where you are!" It was a shout of triumph in the Kezankian dialect of Zamoria.

Conan saw two men in the doorway, each aiming at him a heavy double-curved bow of the Hyrkanian type. One was tall, lean, and red-bearded.

"Keraspa!" said Conan, reaching for the sword and the knife he had dropped.

The other man was a powerful fellow who seemed familiar.

"Stand back!" said the Kezankian chief. "You thought I had run away to my village, did you not? Well, I followed you all night, with the only one of my men not wounded." His glance appraised the idol. "Had I known the temple contained such treasure I should have looted it long ago, despite the superstitions of my people. Rustum, pick up his sword and dagger."

The man stared at the brazen hawk's head that formed the pommel of Conan's scimitar.

"Wait!" he cried. "This is he who saved me from torture in Arenjun! I know this blade!"

"Be silent!" snarled the chief. "The thief dies!"

"Nay! He saved my life! What have I ever had from you but hard tasks and scanty pay? I renounce my allegiance, you dog!"

Rustum stepped forward, raising Conan's sword, but then Keraspa turned and released his arrow. The missile thudded into Rustum's body. The tribesman shrieked and staggered back under the impact, across the floor of the temple, and over the edge of the chasm. His screams came up, fainter and fainter, until they could no longer be heard.

Quick as a striking snake, before the unarmed Conan

50

The Lair of the Ice Worm

Haunted by Atali's icy beauty and bored with the simple life of the Cimmerian villages, Conan rides south toward the civilized realms, hoping to find a ready market for his sword as a condottiere in the service of various Hyborian princelings. At this time, Conan is about twenty-three.

1.

all day, the lone rider had breasted the slopes of the Eiglophian Mountains, which strode from east to west across the world like a mighty wall of snow and ice, sun-dering the northlands of Vanaheim, Asgard, and Hyperborea from the southern kingdoms. In the depth of winter, most of the passes were blocked. With the coming of spring, however, they opened, to afford bands of fierce, light-haired northern barbarians routes by which they could raid the warmer lands to the south.

This rider was alone. At the top of the pass that led southward into the Border Kingdom and Nemedra, he reined in

to sit for a moment, looking at the fantastic scene before him.

The sky was a dome of crimson and golden vapors, darkening from the zenith to the eastern horizon with the purple of oncoming evening. But the fiery splendor of the dying day still painted the white crests of the mountains with a deceptively warm-looking rosy radiance. It threw shadows of deep lavender across the frozen sur-

64

face of a titanic glacier, which wound like an icy serpent from a coomb among the higher peaks, down and down until it curved in front of the pass and then away again to the left, to dwindle in the foothills and turn into a flowing stream of water. He who traveled through the pass had to pick his way cautiously past the margin of the glacier, hoping that he would neither fall into one of its hidden crevasses nor be overwhelmed by an avalanche from the higher slopes. The setting sun turned the glacier into a glittering expanse of crimson and gold. The rocky slopes that rose from the glacier's flanks were dotted with a thin scattering of gnarled, dwarfish trees.

This, the rider knew, was Snow Devil Glacier, also known as the River of Death Ice. He had heard of it, although his years of wandering had never before chanced to take him here. Everything he had heard of this glacier-guarded pass was shadowed by a nameless fear. His own Cimmerian fellow-tribesmen, in their bleak hills to the west, spoke of the Snow Devil in terms of dread, although no one knew why. Often he had wondered at the legends that clustered about the glacier, endowing it with the vague aura of ancient evil. Whole parties had vanished there, men said, never to be heard of again.

The Cimmerian youth named Conan impatiently dismissed these rumors. Doubtless, he thought, the missing men had lacked mountaineering skill and had carelessly strayed out on one of the bridges of thin snow that often masked glacial crevasses. Then the snow bridge had given way, plunging them all to their deaths in the blue-green depths of the glacier. Such things happened often enough, Conan knew; more than one boyhood acquaintance of the young Cimmerian had perished thus. But this was no reason to refer to the Snow Devil with shudders, dark hints, and sidelong glances.

Conan was eager to descend the pass into the low hills

65

of the Border Kingdom, for he had begun to find the simple life of his native Cimmerian village boring. His ill-fated adventure with a band of golden-haired *Aesir* on a raid into Vanaheim had brought him hard knocks and no profit. It had also left him with the haunting memory of the icy beauty of Atali, the frost giant's daughter, who had nearly lured him to an icy death.

Altogether, he had had all he wanted of the bleak northlands. He burned to get back to the hot lands of the South, to taste again the joys of silken raiment, golden wine, fine victuals, and soft feminine flesh. Enough, he thought, of the dull round of village life and the Spartan austerities of camp and field!

His horse picked its way to the place where the glacier thrust itself across the direct route to the lowlands. Conan slid off his mount and led the animal along the narrow pathway between the glacier on his left and the lofty, snow-covered slope on his right. His huge bearskin cloak exaggerated even his hulking size. It hid the coat of chain mail and the heavy broadsword at his hip.

His eyes of volcanic blue glowered out from under the brim of a horned helmet, while a scarf was wound around the lower part of his face to protect his lungs from the bite of the cold air of the heights. He carried a slender lance in his free hand. Where the path meandered out over the surface of the glacier, Conan went gingerly, thrusting the point of the lance into the snow where he suspected that it might mask a crevasse. A battle-ax hung by its thong from his saddle.

He neared the end of the narrow path between the glacier and the hillside, where the glacier swung away to the left and the path continued down over a broad, sloping surface, lightly covered with spring snow and broken by boulders and hummocks. Then a scream of terror made him whip around and jerk up his helmeted head.

66

A bowshot away to his left, where the glacier leveled off before beginning its final descent, a group of shaggy, hulking creatures ringed a slim girl in white furs. Even at this distance, in the clear mountain air, Conan could discern the warm, fresh-cheeked oval of her face and the mane of glossy brown hair that escaped from under her white hood. She was a real beauty.

Without waiting to ponder the matter, Conan threw off his cloak and, using his lance as a pole, vaulted into the saddle. He gathered up the reins and drove his spurs into the horse's ribs. As the startled beast reared a little in the haste with which it bounded forward, Conan opened his mouth to utter the weird and terrible Cimmerian war cry—then shut it again with a snap. As a younger man he would have uttered this shout to hearten himself, but his years of Turanian service had taught him the rudiments of craftiness. There was no use in warning the girl's attackers of his coming any sooner than he must.

They heard his approach soon enough, however. Although the snow muffled his horse's hoofs, the faint jingle of his mail and the creak of his saddle and harness caused one of them to turn. This one shouted and

pulled at his neighbor's arm, so that in a few seconds all had turned to see Conan's approach and set themselves to meet it.

There were about a dozen of the mountain men, armed with crude wooden clubs and with stone-headed spears and axes. They were short-limbed, thick-bodied creatures, wrapped in tattered, mangy furs. Small, bloodshot eyes glared out from under beetling brows and sloping fore-heads; thick lips drew back to reveal large yellow teeth. They were like leftovers from some earlier stage of human evolution, about which Conan had once heard philosophers argue in the courtyards of Nemedian temples. Just

67

now, however, he was too fully occupied with guiding his horse and aiming his lance to spare such matters more than the barest fleeting thought. Then he crashed among them like a thunderbolt.

2.

Conan knew that the only way to deal with such a number of enemies afoot was to take full advantage of the mobility of the horse—to keep moving, so as never to let them cluster around him. For while his mail would protect his own body from most of their blows, even their crude weapons could quickly bring down his mount. So he drove toward the nearest beast-man, guiding his horse a little to the left.

As the iron lance crushed through bone and hairy flesh, the mountain man screamed, dropped his own weapon, and tried to clutch at the shaft of Conan's spear. The thrust of the horse's motion hurled the sub-man to earth. The lance head went down and the butt rose. As he cantered through the scattered band, Conan dragged his lance free.

Behind him, the mountain men broke into a chorus of yells and screams. They pointed and shouted at one another, issuing a dozen contradictory commands at once. Meanwhile Conan guided his mount in a tight circle and galloped back through the throng. A thrown spear glanced from his mailed shoulder; another opened a small gash in his horse's flank. But he drove his lance into another mountain man and again rode free, leaving behind a wrig-gling, thrashing body to spatter the snow with scarlet.

At his third charge, the man he speared rolled as he fell, snapping the lance shaft. As he rode clear, Conan threw away the stump of the shaft and seized the haft of the ax that hung from his saddle. As he rode into them once more, he leaned from his saddle. The steel

68

blade flashed fire in the sunset glow as the ax described a huge figure-eight, with one loop to the right and one to the left. On each side, a mountain man fell into the snow with a cloven skull. Crimson drops spattered the snow. A third mountain man, who did not move quickly enough, was knocked down and trampled by Conan's horse.

With a wail of terror, the trampled man staggered to his feet and fled limping. In an instant, the other six had joined him in panic-stricken flight across the glacier. Conan drew rein to watch their shaggy figures dwindle—and then had to leap clear of the saddle as his horse shuddered and fell. A flint-headed spear had been driven deep into the animal's body, just behind Conan's left leg. A glance showed Conan that the beast was dead.

"Crom damn me for a meddling fool!" he growled to himself. Horses were scarce and costly in the northlands. He had ridden this steed all the way from far Zamora. He had stabled and fed and pampered it through the long winter. He had left it behind when he joined the *AEsir* in their raid, knowing that deep snow *and* treacherous ice would rob it of most of its usefulness. He had counted upon the faithful beast to get him back to the warm lands, and now it lay dead, all because he had impulsively inter-vened in a quarrel among the mountain folk that was none of his affair.

As his panting breath slowed and the red mist of battle fury faded out of his eyes, he turned toward the girl for whom he had fought. She stood a few feet away, staring at him wide-eyed.

"Are you all right, lass?" he grunted. "Did the brutes hurt you? Have no fear; I'm not a foe. I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

Her reply came in a dialect he had never heard before. It seemed to be a form of Hyperborean, mixed with words from other tongues—some from Nemedian and others

69

from sources he did not recognize. He found it hard to gather more than half her meaning.

"You fight—like a god," she panted. "I thought—you Ymir come to save Ilga."

As she calmed, he drew the story from her in spurts of words. She was Ilga of the Virunian people, a branch of the Hyperboreans who had strayed into the Border King-dom. Her folk lived in perpetual war with the hairy can-nibals who dwelt in caves among the Eiglophian peaks. The struggle for survival in this barren realm was desperate; she would have been eaten by her captors had not Conan rescued her.

Two days before, she explained, she had set out with a small party of Virunians to cross the pass above Snow Devil Glacier. Thence they planned to journey several days' ride northeast to Sigtona, the nearest of the Hyperborean strongholds. There they had kinsmen, among whom the Virunians hoped to trade at the spring fair. There Ilga's uncle, who accompanied her, also meant to seek a good husband for her. But they had been ambushed by the hairy ones, and only Ilga had survived the terrible battle on the slippery slopes. Her uncle's last command to her, before he fell with his skull cleft by a flint ax, had been to ride like the wind for home.

Before she was out of sight of the mountain men, her horse had fallen on a patch of ice and broken a leg. She had

thrown herself clear and, though bruised, had fled afoot. The hairy ones, however, had seen the fall, and a party of them came scampering down over the glacier to seize her. For hours, it seemed, she had run from them. But at last they had caught up with her and ringed her round, as Conan had seen.

Conan grunted his sympathy; his profound dislike of Hyperboreans, based upon his sojourn in a Hyperborean slave pen, did not extend to their women. It was a hard

70

tale, but life in the bleak northlands was grim. He had often heard the like.

Now, however, another problem faced them. Night had fallen, and neither had a horse. The wind was rising, and they would have little chance of surviving through the night on the surface of the glacier. They must find shelter and make a fire, or Snow Devil Glacier would add two more victims to its toll.

3.

Late that night, Conan fell asleep. They had found a hollow beneath an overhang of rock on the side of the glacier, where the ice had melted away enough to let them squeeze in. With their backs to the granite surface of the cliff, deeply scored and striated by the rubbing of the glacier, they had room to stretch out. In front of the hollow rose the flank of the glacier—clear, translucent ice, fissured by cavernous crevasses and tunnels. Although the chill of the ice struck through to their bones, they were still warmer than they would have been on the surface above, where a howling wind was now driving dense clouds of snow before it.

Ilga had been reluctant to accompany Conan, although he made it plain that he meant the lass no harm. She had tugged away from his hand, crying out an unfamiliar word, which sounded something like *yakhmar*. At length, losing patience, he had given her a mild cuff on the side of the head and carried her unconscious to the dank haven of the cave.

Then he had gone out to recover his bearskin cloak and the gear and supplies tied to his saddle. From the rocky slope that rose from the edge of the glacier, he had gathered a double armful of twigs, leaves, and wood, which he had carried to the cave. There, with flint and steel, he had coaxed a small fire into life. It gave more

71

the illusion of warmth than true warmth, for he dared not let it grow too large lest it melt the nearby walls of the glacier and flood them out of their refuge.

The orange gleams of the fire shone deeply into the fissures and tunnels that ran back into the body of the glacier until their windings and branchings were lost in the dim distance. A faint gurgle of running water came to Conan's ears, now and then punctuated by the creak and crack of slowly moving ice.

Conan went out again into the biting wind, to hack from the stiffening body of his horse some thick slabs of meat. These he brought back to the cave to roast on the ends of pointed sticks. The horse steaks, together with slabs of black bread from his saddle bag, washed down with bitter Asgardian beer from a goatskin bottle, made a tough but sustaining repast.

Ilga seemed withdrawn as she ate. At first Conan thought she was still angry with him for the blow. But it was gradually borne upon him that her mind was not on this incident at all. She was, instead, in the grip of stark terror. It was not the normal fear she had felt for the band of shaggy brutes that had pursued her, but a deep, superstitious dread somehow connected with the glacier. When he tried to question her, she could do nothing but whisper the strange word, "*Yakhmar! Yakh-mar!*" while her lovely face took on a pale, drawn look of terror. When he tried to get the meaning of the word out of her, she could only make vague gestures, which conveyed nothing to him.

After the meal, warm and weary, they curled up together in his bearskin cloak. Her nearness brought to Conan's mind the thought that a bout of hot love might calm her mind for sleep. His first tentative caresses found her not at all unwilling. Nor was she unresponsive to his youthful ardor; as he soon discovered, she was not new to this game. Before the hour of lovemaking was over,

72

she was gasping and crying out in her passion. Afterwards, thinking her now relaxed, the Cimmerian rolled over and slept like a dead man.

The girl, however, did not sleep. She lay rigid, staring out at the blackness that yawned in the ice cavities beyond the feeble glow of the banked fire. At last, near dawn, came the thing she dreaded.

It was a faint piping sound—a thin, ullulating thread of music that wound around her mind until it was as helpless as a netted bird. Her heart fluttered against her ribs. She could neither move nor speak, even to rouse the snoring youth beside her.

Then two disks of cold green fire appeared in the mouth of the nearest ice tunnel—two great orbs that burned into her young soul and cast a deathly spell over her. There was no soul or mind behind those flaming disks—only remorseless hunger.

Like one walking in a dream, Ilga rose, letting her side of the bearskin cloak slide to her feet. Naked, a slim white form against the dimness, she went forward into the darkness of the tunnel and vanished. The hellish pip-ing faded and ceased; the cold green eyes wavered and disappeared. And Conan slept on.

4.

Conan awoke suddenly. Some eery premonition—some warning from the barbarian's hyperacute senses—sent its current quivering along the tendrils of his nerves. Like some wary jungle cat, Conan came instantly from deep, dreamless slumber to full wakefulness. He lay without movement, every sense searching the air around him.

Then, with a deep growl rumbling in his mighty chest, the Cimmerian heaved to his feet and found himself alone in the cavern. The girl was gone. But her furs, which

73

she had discarded during their lovemaking, were still there. His brows knotted in a baffled scowl. Danger was still in the air, scrabbling with tenuous fingers at the edges of his nerves.

He hastily donned his garments and weapons. With his ax in his clenched fist, he thrust himself through the narrow space between the overhang and the flank of the glacier. Outside on the snow, the wind had died. Although Conan sensed dawn in the air, no gleam of morn-ing had yet dimmed the diamond blaze of thousands of throbbing stars overhead. A gibbous moon hung low above the western peaks, casting a wan glow of pale gold across the snow fields.

Conan's keen glance raked the snow. He saw no foot-prints near the overhang, nor any sign of struggle. On the other hand, it was incredible that Ilga should have wan-dered off into the labyrinth of tunnels and crevasses, where walking was almost impossible even with spiked boots and where a false step could plunge one into one of those cold streams of ice-melt that run along the bottoms of glaciers.

The hairs on Conan's nape prickled at the weirdness of the girl's disappearance. At heart a superstitious barbarian, he feared nothing mortal but was filled with dread and loathing by the uncanny supernatural beings and forces that lurked in the dark corners of his primeval world.

Then, as he continued to search the snow, he went rigid. Something had lately emerged from a gap in the ice a few strides from the overhang. It was huge, long, soft, and sinuous, and it moved without feet. Its writh-ing track was clearly visible in the curving path that its belly had crushed in the soft whiteness, like some mon-strous serpent of the snows.

The setting moon shone faintly, but Conan's wilder-ness-sharpened eyes easily read the path. This path led, curving around hillocks of snow and outjutting ledges of

74

rock, up the hillside away from the glacier—up, toward the windswept peaks. He doubted that it had gone alone.

As he followed the path, a bulky, black, furry shadow, he passed the place where his dead horse had lain. Now there was little left of the carcass but a few bones. The track of the thing could be discerned about the remains, but only faintly, for the wind had blown loose snow over them.

A little further on, he came upon the girl—or what was left of her. Her head was gone, and with it most of the flesh of her upper body, so that the white bones gleamed like ivory in the dimming moonlight. The protruding bones had been cleaned, as if the flesh had been sucked from them or rasped off by some many-toothed tongue.

Conan was a warrior, the hard song of a hard people, who had seen death in a thousand forms. But now a mighty rage shook him. A few hours before, this slim, warm girl had lain in the mighty circle of his arms, re-turning passion for passion. Now nothing was left of her but a sprawled, headless thing, like a doll broken and thrown away.

Conan mastered himself to examine the corpse. With a grunt of surprise, he found that it was frozen solid and sheathed in hard ice.

5.

Conan's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She could not have left his side more than an hour ago, for the cloak had still held some of the warmth from her body when he awoke. In so brief a time, a warm body does not freeze solid, let alone become encased in glittering ice. It was not according to nature.

Then he grunted a coarse expletive. He knew now, with inward loathing and fury, what had borne the sleep-ing girl from his side. He remembered the half-forgotten

75

legends told around the fire in his Cimmerian boyhood. One of these concerned the dread monster of the snows, the grim Remora—the vampiric ice worm whose name was an almost forgotten whisper of horror in Cimmerian myth.

The higher animals, he knew, radiated heat. Below them in the scale of being came the scaled and plated reptiles and fishes, whose temperature was that of their surroundings. But the Remora, the worm of the ice lands, seemed unique in that it radiated *cold*; at least, that was how Conan would have expressed it. It gave out a sort of bitter cold that could encase a corpse in an armor of ice within minutes. Since none of Conan's fellow-tribesmen claimed to have seen a Remora, Conan had assumed that the creature was long extinct.

This, then, must be the monster that Ilga had dreaded, and of which she had vainly tried to warn him by the name

yakhmar.

Conan grimly resolved to track the thing to its lair and slay it. His reasons for this decision were vague, even to himself. But, for all his youthful impulsiveness and his wild, lawless nature, he had his own rude code of honor. He liked to keep his word and to fulfill an obligation that he had freely undertaken. While he did not think of himself as a stainless, chivalrous hero, he treated women with a rough kindness that contrasted with the harshness and truculence with which he met those of his own sex. He refrained from forcing his lusts upon women if they were unwilling, and he tried to protect them when he found them dependent upon him.

Now he had failed in his own eyes. In accepting his rough act of love, the girl Ilga had placed herself under his protection. Then, when she needed his strength, he had slumbered unaware like some besotted beast. Not knowing about the hypnotic piping sound by which the Remora paralyzed its victims and by which it had kept

76

him—usually a light sleeper—sound asleep, he cursed himself for a stupid, ignorant fool not to have paid more heed to her warnings. He ground his powerful teeth and bit his lips in rage, determined to wipe out this stain on his code of honor if it cost him his life.

As the sky lightened in the east, Conan returned to the cave. He bundled together his belongings and laid his plans. A few years before, he might have rushed out on the ice worm's trail, trusting to his immense strength and the keen edges of his weapons to see him through. But experience, if it had not yet tamed all his rash impulses, had taught him the beginnings of caution. It would be impossible to grapple with the ice worm with naked hands. The very touch of the creature meant frozen death. Even his sword and his ax were of doubtful effectiveness. The extreme cold might make their metal brittle, or the cold might run up their hafts and freeze the hand that wielded them.

But—and here a grim smile played over Conan's lips—perhaps he could turn the ice worm's power against itself.

Silently and swiftly he made his preparations. Gorged, the gelid worm would doubtless slumber through the daylight hours. But Conan did not know how long it would take him to reach the creature's lair, and he feared that another gale might wipe out its serpentine track.

6.

As it turned out, it took Conan little more than an hour to find the ice worm's lair. The dawning sun had ascended only a little way above the eastern peaks of the Eiglophians, making the snow fields sparkle like pavements of crushed diamonds, when he stood at last before the mouth of the ice cave into which the writhing snow track led him. This cave opened in the flank of a smaller glacier, a tributary of the Snow Devil. From his elevation,

77

Conan could look back down the slope to where this minor glacier curved to join the main one, like the affluent of a river.

Conan entered the opening. The light of the rising sun glanced and flashed from the translucent ice walls on either side, breaking up into rainbow patterns and poly-chrome gleams. Conan had the sensation of walking by some magical means through the solid substance of a colossal gem.

Then, as he penetrated deeper into the glacier, the darkness congealed around him. Still, he doggedly set one foot before the other, plodding onward. He raised the collar of his bearskin cloak to protect his face from the numbing cold that poured past him, making his eyeballs ache and forcing him to take short, shallow breaths to keep his lungs from being frosted. Crystals of ice formed like a delicate mask upon his face, to shatter with each movement and as quickly to re-form. But he went on, carefully holding that which he carried so gingerly inside his cloak.

Then in the gloom before him opened two cold green eyes, which stared into the roots of his soul. These luminous orbs cast a gelid, submarine light of their own. By their faint, fungoid phosphorescence, he could see that there the cavern ended in a round well, which was the ice worm's nest. Coiled on undulating coils, its immense length was curled in the hollow of its nest. Its boneless form was covered with the silken nap of thick white fur. Its mouth was merely a jawless, circular opening, now puckered and closed. Above the mouth, the two luminous orbs gleamed out of a smooth, rounded, featureless, eel-like head.

Replete, the ice worm took a few heartbeats to react to Conan's presence. During the countless eons that the thing of the snows had dwelt in the cold silences of Snow Devil Glacier, no puny man-thing had ever chal-

78

lenged it in the frozen depths of its nest. Now its weird, trilling, mind-binding song rose about Conan, pouring over him in lulling, overpowering, narcotic waves.

But it was too late. Conan threw back his cloak to expose his burden. This was his heavy steel-homed Asgardian helmet, into which he had packed the glowing coals of his fire, and in which the head of his ax also lay buried, held in place by a loop of the chin strap around the handle. A rein from his horse's harness was looped around the ax-helve and the chin strap.

Holding the end of the rein in one hand, Conan whirled the whole mass over his head, round and round, as if he were whirling a sling. The rush of air fanned the faintly glowing coals to red, then to yellow, then to white. A stench of burning helmet padding arose.

The ice worm raised its blunt head. Its circular mouth slowly opened, revealing a ring of small, inward-pointing teeth. As the piping sound grew to an intolerable pitch and the black circle of mouth moved toward him, Conan stopped the whirl of the helmet on the end of its thong. He snatched out the ax, whose helve was charred, smoking and flaming where it entered the fiercely glowing ax head. A quick cast sent the incandescent weapon loop-ing into the cavernous maw. Holding the helmet by one of its horns, Conan hurled the glowing coals after the ax. Then he turned and ran.

7.

Conan never quite knew how he reached the exit. The writhing agony from the thing of the snows shook the glacier. Ice cracked thunderously all around him. The draft of interstellar cold no longer wafted out of the tunnel; instead, a blinding, swirling fog of steam choked the air.

Stumbling, slipping, and falling on the slick, uneven

79

surface of the ice, banging into one side wall of the tunnel and then the other, Conan at last reached the outer air. The glacier trembled beneath his feet with the titanic convulsions of the dying monster within. Plumes of steam wafted from a score of crevasses and caverns on either side of Conan, who, slipping and skidding, ran down the snowy slope. He angled off to one side to get free of the ice. But, before he reached the solid ground of the mountainside, with its jagged boulders and stunted trees, the glacier exploded. When the white-hot steel of the ax head met the frigid interior of the monster, something had to give way.

With a crashing roar, the ice quivered, broke up, hurled glassy fragments into the air, and collapsed into a chaotic mass of ice and pouring water, soon hidden by a vast cloud of vapor. Conan lost his footing, fell, tumbled, rolled, slid, and fetched up with bruising force against a boulder on the edge of the ice flow. Snow stuffed his mouth and blinded his eyes. A big piece of ice up-ended toppled, and struck his boulder, nearly burying him in fragments of ice.

Half stunned, Conan dragged himself out from under the mass of broken ice. Although cautious moving of his limbs showed no bones to be broken, he bore enough bruises to have been in a battle. Above him, a tremendous cloud of vapor and glittering ice crystals whirled up-ward from the site of the ice worm's cavern, now a black crater. Fragments of ice and slush poured into this crater from all sides. The whole level of the glacier in the area had sunk.

Little by little the scene returned to normal. The bit-ing mountain breeze blew away the clouds of vapor. The water from the melting of the ice froze again. The glacier returned to its usual near-immobility.

Battered and weary, Conan limped down into the pass.

80

Lamed as he was, he must now walk all the way to far Nemedias or Ophir, unless he could buy, beg, borrow, or steal another horse. But he went with a high heart, turning his bruised face southward—to the golden South, where shining cities lifted tall towers to a balmy sun, and where a strong man with courage and luck could win gold, wine, and soft, full-breasted women.

81