

Chronological order of the CONAN series:

CONAN

CONAN OF CIMMERIA CONAN THE FREEBOOTER CONAN THE WANDERER

CONAN THE ADVENTURER CONAN THE BUCCANEER CONAN THE WARRIOR

CONAN THE USURPER CONAN THE CONQUEROR CONAN THE AVENGER

CONAN OF AQUILONIA CONAN OF THE ISLES



THE FREEBOOTER

Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp

Prestige Books Inc., Publishers

Distributed by Ace Books

A division of Charter Communications, Inc.

A Grosset & Dunlap Company

CONAN THE FREEBOOTER

Copyright © 1968 by L. Sprague de Camp. All rights reserved.

Hawks over Shem was rewritten by L. Sprague de Camp from an original story by Robert E. Howard called *Hawks over Egypt*, laid in 11th-century Egypt. *Hawks over Shem* was first published in *Fantastic Universe Science Fiction* for October, 1955; copyright © 1955 by King-Size Publications, Inc. It was reprinted in *Tales of Conan*. N.Y.: Gnome Press, Inc., 1955.

Black Colossus was first published in *Weird Tales* for June, 1933; copyright 1933 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. It was reprinted in *Conan the Bar-barian*, N.Y.: Gnome Press, Inc., 1954.

Shadows in the Moonlight was first published in *Weird Tales* for April, 1934; copyright 1934 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. It was reprinted in *Conan the Barbarian* and in *Swords and Sorcery*, ed. by L. Sprague de Camp, N.Y.: Pyramid Publications, Inc., 1963.

The Road of the Eagles was rewritten by L. Sprague de Camp from an original story by Robert E. Howard of the same title, but laid in the 16th century Turkish Empire. It was published in *Fantastic Universe Science Fiction* for December, 1955, under the title *Conan, Man of Destiny*; copyright © 1955 by King-Size Publications, Inc. It was reprinted under its present title in *Tales of Conan*.

A Witch Shall Be Born was first published in *Weird Tales* for December, 1934; copyright 1934 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. It was reprinted in *Avon Fantasy Reader No. 10, 1949*, and in *Conan the Barbarian*.

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, 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.

Printed in U.S.A.

Distributed by Ace Books
A division of Charter Communications, Inc.
A Grosset & Dunlap Company

Contents

INTRODUCTION , by L. Sprague de Camp	8
HAWKS OVER SHEM , by Robert E. Howard & L. Sprague de Camp	15
BLACK COLOSSUS , by Robert E. Howard	54
SHADOWS IN THE MOONLIGHT , by Robert E. Howard	99
THE ROAD OF THE EAGLES , by Robert E. Howard & L. Sprague de Camp	133
A WITCH SHALL BE BORN , by Robert E. Howard	172

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 E. Howard (1906-36), the creator of Conan, was born in Peaster, Texas, and spent most of his life in Cross Plains, in the center of Texas. During his short life (which ended in suicide at the age of thirty) Howard turned out a large volume of popular fiction: sport, detective, western, historical, adventure, science-fiction, weird, and ghost stories, besides his verse and his many fantasies. Of his several series of heroic fantasies, the most popular have been the Conan stories. Eighteen of these were published in Howard's lifetime; eight others, from mere fragments and outlines to complete manuscripts, have been found among his papers since 1950. The incomplete stories have been completed by my colleague Lin Carter and myself.

In addition, in the early 1950s, I rewrote four unpublished Howard manuscripts of oriental adventure, to convert them into Conan stories by changing names, deleting anachronisms, and introducing a supernatural element. This was not hard, since Howard's heroes were pretty much all cut from the same cloth, and the resulting posthumous collaborations are still about three-quarters or four-fifths Howard. Two of these converted stories appear in the present volume: "Hawks over Shem" (originally called "Hawks over Egypt"), a story laid in eleventh-century Egypt, in the reign of the mad Caliph Hakim; and "The Road of the Eagles," originally placed in the sixteenth-century Turkish Empire.

Moreover, my colleagues Lin Carter and Bjorn Nyberg and I have collaborated on several Conan pastiches, based upon hints in Howard's notes and letters.

8

The Conan stories are laid in Howard's fictional Hyborian Age, about twelve thousand years ago between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginnings of recorded history. Conan, a gigantic barbarian adventurer from the backward northern land of Cimmeria, arrived as a youth in the kingdom of Zamora (see the map) and for several years made a precarious living there and in neighboring lands as a thief. Then he served as a mercenary soldier, first in the oriental realm of Turan and then in the Hyborian kingdoms.

Forced to flee from Argos, Conan became a pirate along the coasts of Kush, in partnership with a Shemitish she-pirate, Belit, with a crew of black corsairs. After Belit's death and some hairbreadth adventures among the black tribes, he re-turned to the trade of mercenary in Shem. Here the present volume begins.

Nearly twenty years ago, my old friend John D. Clark, a chemist and a Conan buff long before I was, edited the then-known Conan stories for the volumes published by Gnome Press. He wrote an eloquent introduction to the first

volume of this series to be issued, *Conan the Conqueror*. This essay gives a free-swinging impression of Howard's fiction in general and the Conan stories in particular. Dr. Clark has allowed me to quote it here:

It was almost seventeen years ago when I collided with the Hyborian Age. It was a notable collision, occurring when I was caught by the somewhat juicy cover on the September 1933 *Weird Tales*, read "The Slithering Shadow," and met Conan for the first time. It was an introduction that stuck, and from then on I followed the adventures of that slightly unconventional character with more than casual interest. A little later (1935 or so) Schuyler Miller and I decided to make a try at plotting out Conan's world. It turned out to be ridiculously easy. The countries flopped out on the paper, squirmed about a bit, and clicked together into an indubitable and obviously authentic map. We wrote to Howard then and found that his own map was practically identical with ours; his biography of Conan was also identical in all important respects with the one Miller and I had concocted from the internal evidence in the stories. As I remember, the most important point of disagreement was a two years' difference in Conan's age at one point in the stories.

9

We knew then that we had a story-teller on our hands who knew his business. And when we read the manuscript of "The Hyborian Age," some time before it was first published, we were sure of it.

Anyhow, in the next few years I managed to pick up the rest of Howard's fantasies, including King Kull and all the rest. It was obvious, of course, that although some of them had apparently been written before that gorgeous concept filtered into his mind, they might be fitted into the pattern with a little stretching. . . .

Among the Conan stories are fragments of the biography of that remarkable character, as deduced by Miller and myself, accounting for most of Conan's travels and adventures that are not re-counted in the tales themselves. They do *not*, however, explain how he managed to get rid of the woman of which he was usually possessed by the end of a story in time for him to acquire another in the next. I might, by the way, recommend that question as a subject for literary research to some budding Ph.D. in English. The results of the inquiry might be at least as useful as a publication purporting finally to decide whether Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford really wrote the works of the alleged W. Shakespeare. . . .

I do not intend to write about Robert E. Howard himself. I never knew him personally and those who did can do a better job than I. I knew him only as the writer of some incredibly good fantasy. The parts of a writer that don't die with his body are his stories—and Howard's yarns are not going to die among those who frankly and whole-heartedly like adventure on the grand scale. You are probably one of those readers or you wouldn't have bought this book in the first place.

Howard was a first-rate teller of tales, with a remarkable technical command of his tools and with a complete lack of inhibitions. With a fine and free hand he took what he liked from the more spectacular aspects of all ages and climes: proper names of every conceivable linguistic derivation, weapons from everywhere and everywhen under the sun, customs and classes from the whole ancient and medieval world, and fitted the whole together into a coherent and self-consistent cosmos without a visible joint. Then he added a king-sized portion of the supernatural to add zest to the whole, and the result was a purple and golden and crimson universe where anything can happen—except the tedious.

His heroes are never profound—but they are never dull. Kull, Solomon Kane, Bran Mak Morn, Conan himself, walk and talk and are alive and of one piece. They may not be exactly the types of persons whom we would invite to a polite party, but they're not

10

exactly the sort of persons whom we would forget if they came anyway. Conan, the hero of all Howard's heroes, is the armored swashbuckler, indestructible and irresistible, that we've all wanted to be at one time or another; the women, in appearance, manner, and costume (or lack of it) are the inmates of the sort of harem that harems ought to be but aren't (and isn't it a shame, and wouldn't it be nice, if they were commoner?); the villains are villainous as only perfect villains can be; the sorcerers are sorcerers in spades; and the apparitions they conjure up, or who appear under their own power, are (thank God!) out of this world.

And above all Howard was a story-teller. The story came first, last, and in between. Something is always happening, and the flow of action never hesitates from beginning to end, as one incident flows smoothly and inevitably into the next with never a pause for the reader to take breath. Don't look for hidden philosophical meanings or intellectual puzzles in the yarns—they aren't there. *Howard was a story-teller*. The tales are the sword-and-cloaker carried to the ultimate limit and a little beyond, with enough extra sex to keep the results off the more tedious library shelves.

So here is the book. If you have read of Conan before, you know what to expect. If you haven't, and are addicted to fantastic adventure, you can repair the omission and sit down now and read of the gods and demons and of the warriors and their women and of their adventures in a world that never was but should have been. If the history propounded doesn't agree with what you know of history—if the ethnology is remarkable and the geology more so—don't let it worry you. Howard was writing of another Earth than this one—one painted in brighter colors and on a grander scale.

If, on the other hand, you insist on realism in your reading—if you must have novels about introverts suffering in a brutal world—if your meat is something "close to the soil" or concerned with psychopathology or the state of the world, then, my friend, this book is not for you. You'd better find yourself a hole and read *Crime and Punishment*. But I won't be there with you—I have an engagement in the Hyborian Age, and will be busy all evening.

John D. Clark, Ph.D New York City April 5, 1950.

11

For further information on and opinions about Howard, the Conan stories, and heroic fantasy in general, see the

other volumes of this series.

L. Sprague de Camp

12

Hawks over Shem

Following the events of the story The Snout in the Dark, Conan, dissatisfied with his accomplishments in the black countries, wanders northward across the deserts of Stygia to the meadowlands of Shem. During this trek, his reputation stands him in good stead. He presently finds himself in the army of King Sumu-abi of Akkhar, one of the southerly Shemitish city-states. Through the treachery of one Othbaal, cousin of the mad King Akhirom of Pelishtia, the Akkharian forces are ambushed and wiped out—all but Conan, who survives to track the renegade to Asgalun, the Pe-lishti capital.

The tall figure in the white cloak wheeled, cursing softly, hand at scimitar hilt. Not lightly did men walk the nighted streets of Asgalun, capital of Shemitish Pelishtia. In this dark, winding alley of the unsavory river quarter, anything might happen.

"Why do you follow me, dog?" The voice was harsh, slurring the Shemitic gutturals with the accents of Hyrkania.

Another tall figure emerged from the shadows, clad, like the first, in a cloak of white silk but lacking the other's spired helmet.

"Did you say, 'dog'?" The accent differed from the Hyrkanian's.

"Aye, dog. I have been followed—"

Before the Hyrkanian could get further, the other rushed with the sudden blinding speed of a pouncing

15

tiger. The Hyrkanian snatched at his sword. Before the blade cleared the scabbard, a huge fist smote the side of his head. But for the Hyrkanian's powerful build and the protection of the camail of ring mail that hung down from his helmet, his neck might have been broken. As it was, he was hurled sprawling to the pavement, his sword clattering out of his grasp.

As the Hyrkanian shook his head and groped back to consciousness, he saw the other standing over him with drawn saber. The stranger rumbled: "I follow nobody, and I let nobody call me dog! Do you understand that, dog?"

The Hyrkanian glanced about for his sword and saw that the other had already kicked it out of reach. Thinking to gain time until he could spring for his weapon, he said: "Your pardon if I wronged you, but I have been followed since nightfall. I heard stealthy footsteps along the dark alleys. Then you came unexpectedly into view, in a place most suited for murder."

"Ishtar confound you! Why should I follow you? I have lost my way. I've never seen you before, and I hope never to—"

A stealthy pad of feet brought the stranger round, springing back and wheeling to keep both the Hyrkanian and the newcomers before him.

Four huge figures loomed menacingly in the shadows, the dim starlight glinting on curved blades. There was also a glimmer of white teeth and eyeballs against dark skins.

For an instant there was tense stillness. Then one muttered in the liquid accents of the black kingdoms: "Which is our dog? Here be two clad alike, and the darkness makes them twins."

"Cut down both," replied another, who towered half a head above his tall companions. "We shall then make no mistake and leave no witness."

So saying, the four Negroes came on in deadly silence.

16

The stranger took two long strides to where the Hyrkanian's sword lay. With a growl of "Here!" he kicked the weapon at the Hyrkanian, who snatched it up; then rushed upon the advancing blacks with a snarling oath.

The giant Kushite and one other closed with the stranger while the other two ran at the Hyrkanian. The stranger, with that same feline speed he had shown earlier, leaped in without awaiting attack. A quick feint, a clang of steel, and a lightning slash sheared the head of the smaller black from his shoulders. As the stranger struck, so did the giant, with a long forehand sweep that should have cut the stranger in two at the waist.

But, despite his size, the stranger moved even faster than the blade as it hissed through the night air. He dropped to the ground in a crouch so that the scimitar passed over him. As he squatted in front of his antagonist, he struck at the black's legs. The blade bit into muscle and bone. As the black reeled on his wounded leg and swung his sword up for another slash, the stranger sprang up and in, under the lifted arm, and drove his blade to the hilt in the Negro's chest. Blood spurted along the stranger's wrist. The scimitar fell waveringly, to cut through the silken kaffia and glance from the steel cap beneath. The giant sank down dying.

The stranger tore out his blade and whirled. The Hyrkanian had met the attack of his two Negroes coolly, re-treating slowly to keep them in front of him. He suddenly slashed one across the chest and shoulder so that he dropped his sword and fell to his knees with a moan. As he fell he gripped his foe's knees and hung on like a leech. The Hyrkanian kicked and struggled in vain. Those black arms, bulging with iron muscles, held him fast, while the remaining Negro redoubled the fury of his strokes.

Even as the Kushite swordsman drew breath for a stroke that the hampered Hyrkanian could not have parried, he heard the rush of feet behind him. Before he could

17

turn, the stranger's saber drove through him with such fury that the blade sprang half its length out of his chest, while the hilt smote him fiercely between the shoulders. Life went out of him with a cry.

The Hyrkanian caved in the skull of his other antagonist with his hilt and shook himself free of the corpse. He turned to the stranger, who was pulling his saber out of the body it transfixed.

"Why did you come to my aid after nearly knocking my head off?" he asked.

The other shrugged. "We were two men beset by rogues. Fate made us allies. Now, if you like, well take up our quarrel again. You said I spied upon you."

"I see my mistake and crave your pardon," answered the Hyrkanian promptly. "I know now who has been skulking after me."

He wiped and sheathed his scimitar and bent over each corpse in turn. When he came to the body of the giant, he paused and murmured:

"Soho! Keluka the Swordsman! Of high rank the archer whose shaft is paneled with pearls!" He wrenched from the limp black finger a heavy, ornate ring, slipped the ring into his sash, and laid hold of the garments of the dead man. "Help me to dispose of this carrion, brother, so that no questions shall be asked."

The stranger grasped a bloodstained jacket in each hand and dragged the bodies after the Hyrkanian down a reeking black alley, in which rose the broken curb of a ruined and forgotten well. The corpses plunged into the abyss and struck far below with sullen splashes. With a light laugh the Hyrkanian turned.

"The gods have made us allies," he said. "I owe you a debt"

"You owe me naught," answered the other in a surly tone.

"Words cannot level a mountain. I am Farouz, an archer of Mazdak's Hyrkanian horse. Come with me to a more

18

seemly spot, where we can converse in comfort. I hold no grudge for the buffet you dealt me, though, by Tariml my head still rings from it"

The stranger grudgingly sheathed his saber and followed the Hyrkanian. Their way led through the gloom of reeking alleys and along narrow, winding streets. Asgalun was a contrast of splendor and decay, where opulent palaces rose among the smoke-stained ruins of buildings of forgotten ages. A swarm of suburbs clustered about the walls of the forbidden inner city where dwelt King Akblrom and his nobles.

The two men came to a newer and more respectable quarter, where the latticed windows of overhanging balconies almost touched one another across the street.

"All the shops are dark," grunted the stranger. "A few days ago the city was lighted like day, from dusk to sun-rise."

"One of Akhirom's whims. Now he has another, that no lights shall burn in Asgalun. What his mood will be to-morrow, Pteor only knows."

They halted before an iron-bound door in a heavy stone arch, and the Hyrkanian rapped cautiously. A voice challenged from within and was answered by a password. The door opened, and the Hyrkanian pushed into thick darkness, drawing his companion with him. The door closed behind them, A heavy leather curtain was pulled back, revealing a lamplit corridor and a scarred old Shemite.

"An old soldier turned to wine-selling," said the Hyrkanian. "Lead us to a chamber where we can be alone, Khan-non."

"Most of the chambers are empty," grumbled Khannon, limping before them. "I'm a ruined man. Men fear to touch the cup, since the king banned wine. Pteor smite him with gout!"

The stranger glanced curiously into the larger chambers that they passed, where men sat at food and drink. Most

19

of Khannon's customers were typical Pelishtin: stocky, swarthy men with hooked noses and curly blue-black beards. Occasionally one saw men of the more slender type that roamed the deserts of eastern Shem, or Hyrkanians or black Kushites from the mercenary army of Pelishtia.

Khannon bowed the two men into a small room, where he spread mats for them. He set before them a great dish of fruits and nuts, poured wine from a bulging skin, and limped away muttering.

"Pelishtia has come upon evil days, brother," drawled the Hyrkanian, quaffing the wine of Kyros. He was a tall man, leanly but strong built. Keen black eyes, slightly askant, danced restlessly in a face with a yellowish tinge. His hawk nose overhung a thin, black, drooping mustache. His plain cloak was of costly fabric, his spired helmet was chased with silver, and jewels glittered in the hilt of his scimitar.

He looked at a man as tall as himself, but who contrasted with him in many ways. The other had thicker limbs and

greater depth of chest: the build of a moun-taineer. Under his white kaffia his broad brown face, youthful but already seamed with the scars of brawls and battles, showed smooth-shaven. His natural complexion was lighter than that of the Hyrkanian, the darkness of his features being more of the sun than of nature. A hint of stormy fires smoldered in his cold blue eyes. He gulped his wine and smacked his lips.

Farouz grinned and refilled his goblet. "You fight well, brother. If Mazdak's Hyrkanians were not so infernally jealous of outsiders, you'd make a good trooper."

The other merely grunted.

"Who are you, anyway?" persisted Farouz. "I've told you who I am."

"I am Ishbak, a Zuagir from the eastern deserts."

The Hyrkanian threw back his head and laughed loudly, 20 bringing a scowl to the face of the other, who said: "What's so funny?"

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Do you say I lie?" snarled the stranger.

Farouz grinned. "No Zuagir ever spoke Pelishtic with an accent like yours, for the Zuagir tongue is but a dialect of Shemitish. Moreover, during our fight with the Kush-ites, you called upon strange gods—Crom and Manan-nan—whose names I have heard before from barbarians of the far North. Fear not; I am in your debt and can keep a secret"

The stranger half started up, grasping his hilt. Farouz merely took a sip of wine. After an instant of tension the stranger sank back. With an air of discomfiture he said:

"Very well. I am Conan, a Cimmerian, late of the army of King Sumuabi of Akkharia."

The Hyrkanian grinned and stuffed grapes into his mouth. Between chews he said: "You could never be a spy, friend Conan. You are too quick and open in your anger. What brings you to Asgalun?"

"A little matter of revenge."

"Who is your enemy?"

"An Anaki named Othbaal, may the dogs gnaw his bones!"

Farouz whistled. "By Pteor, you aim at a lofty target! Know you that this man is the general of all King Akhl-rbm's Anakian troops?"

"Crom! It matters as little to me as if he were a collec-tor of offal."

"What has Othbaal done to you?"

Conan said: "The people of Anakia revolted against their king, who's an even bigger fool than Akhirom. They asked help of Akkharia. Sumuabi hoped they would suc-ceed and choose a friendlier king than the one in power, so he called for volunteers. Five hundred of us marched to help the Anakim. But this damned Othbaal had been

21

playing both sides. He led the revolt to encourage the king's enemies to come out into the open, and then be- trayed the rebels into the arms of this king, who butch-ered the lot.

"Othbaal also knew we were coming, so he set a trap for us. Not knowing what had happened, we fell into it. Only I escaped with my life, and that by shamming death. The rest of us either fell on the field or were put to death with the fanciest tortures the king's Sabatean torturer could devise." The moody blue eyes narrowed. "I've fought men before this and thought no more of them afterwards, but in this case I swore I'd pay back Othbaal for some of my dead friends. When I got back to Akkharia I learned that Othbaal had fled from Anakia for fear of the people and had come here. How has he risen so high so fast?"

"He's a cousin of King Akhirom," said Farouz. "Akhi-rom, though a Pelishti, is also a cousin of the king of An-akia and was reared at that court. The kings of these little Shemitish city-states are all more or less related, which makes their wars all quarrels within the family and all the bitterer in consequence. How long have you been in Asgalun?"

"Only a few days. Long enough to learn that the king is mad. No wine indeed!" Conan spat

"There is more to learn. Akhirom is indeed mad, and the people murmur under his heel. He holds his power by means of three bodies of mercenary troops, with whose aid he overthrew and slew his brother, the previous king. First, the Anakim, whom he recruited while an exile at the court of Anakia. Secondly, the black Kushites, who under their general, Imbalayo, yearly gain more power. And thirdly, the Hyrkanian horse, like myself. Their gen-eral is Mazdak, and among him and Imbalayo and Oth-baal there is enough hatred and jealousy to have started a dozen wars. You saw some of it in this evening's encoun-ter.

22

"Othbaal came here last year as a penniless adventurer. He has risen partly by his relationship to Akhirom, and partly by the intrigues of an Ophirean slave-woman named Rufia, whom he won at gaming from Mazdak and then refused to return when the Hyrkanian had sobered up. That's another reason for there being little love be-tween them. There is a woman behind Akhirom, too: Zeriti the Stygian, a witch. Men say she has driven him mad by the potions she has fed him to keep him under her government. If that's true, then she defeated her own ends, for now nobody can control him."

Conan set down his goblet and looked straight at Fa-rouz. "Well, what now? Will you betray me, or did you speak truth when you said you would not?"

Turning in his fingers the ring he had taken from Ke-luka, Farouz mused. "Your secret is safe with me. For one reason, I too owe Othbaal a heavy debt. If you succeed in your quest ere I find means to discharge it, I shall bear the loss with serenity."

Conan started forward, his iron fingers gripping the Hyrkanian's shoulder. "Do you speak truth?" "May these

potbellied Shemitish gods smite me with boils if I lie!"

"Then let me aid you in your vengeance!"

"You? An outsider, who knows nought of the secret ways of Asgalun?"

"Of course! So much the better; having no local ties, I can be trusted. Come on; let's make a plan. Where is the swine and how do we get to him?"

Farouz, though no weakling, recoiled a little before the primitive elemental force that blazed in the eyes and showed in the manner of the other. "Let me think," he said. "There is a way, if one is swift and daring . . ."

Later, two hooded figures halted in a group of palms among the ruins of nighted Asgalun. Before them lay the waters of a canal, and beyond it, rising from its bank, the

25

great bastioned wall of sun-dried brick which encircled the inner city. The inner city was really a gigantic fortress, sheltering the king and his trusted nobles and mercenary troops, forbidden to common men without a pass.

"We could climb the wall," muttered Conan.

"And find ourselves no nearer our foe," answered Farouz, groping in the shadows. "Here!"

Conan saw the Hyrkanian fumble at a shapeless heap of marble. "An ancient ruined shrine," grumbled Farouz. "But-ah!"

He lifted a broad slab, revealing steps leading down into darkness. Conan frowned suspiciously.

Farouz explained: "This tunnel leads under the wall and up into the house of Othbaal, which stands just beyond."

"Under the canal?"

"Aye. Once Othbaal's house was the pleasure-house of King Uriaz, who slept on a down-cushion floating on a pool of quicksilver, guarded by tame lions—yet fell before the avenger's dagger in spite of all. He prepared secret exits from all parts of his houses. Before Othbaal took the house, it belonged to his rival Mazdak. The Anaki knows nothing of this secret, so cornel!"

Swords drawn, they groped down a flight of stone steps and advanced along a level tunnel in blackness. Conan's groping fingers told him that the walls, floor, and ceiling were composed of huge blocks of stone. As they advanced, the stones became slippery and the air grew dank. Drops of water fell on Conan's neck, making him shiver and swear. They were passing under the canal. Later, this dampness abated. Farouz hissed a warning, and they mounted another flight of stairs.

At the top, the Hyrkanian fumbled with a catch. A panel slid aside, and a soft light streamed in. Farouz slipped through the opening and, after Conan had followed, closed it behind them. It became one of the inlaid

24

panels of the wall, not differing to the sight from the other panels. They stood in a vaulted corridor, while Farouz pulled his kaffia around to hide his face and motioned Conan to do likewise. Farouz then led the way down the corridor without hesitation. The Cimmerian followed, sword in hand, glancing to right and left.

They passed through a curtain of dark velvet and came upon an arched doorway of gold-inlaid ebony. A brawny black, naked but for a silken loincloth, started up from his doze, sprang to his feet, and swung a great scimitar. But he did not cry out; his open mouth revealed the cavernous emptiness of the mouth of a mute.

"Quietly!" snapped Farouz, avoiding the sweep of the mute's sword. As the Negro stumbled from his wasted effort, Conan tripped him. He fell sprawling, and Farouz passed his sword through the dark body.

"That was quick and silent enough!" breathed Farouz with a grin. "Now for the real prey!"

Cautiously he tried the door, while the giant Cimmerian crouched at his shoulder, eyes burning like those of a hunting tiger. The door gave inward, and they sprang into the chamber. Farouz closed the door behind them and set his back to it, laughing at the man who leaped up from his divan with a startled oath. Beside him, a woman half-rose from the cushions and screamed. Farouz said:

"We've run the buck to cover, brother!"

For a fraction of a second, Conan took in the spectacle. Othbaal was a tall, lusty man, his thick black hair gathered in a knot at his nape and his black beard oiled, curled, and precisely trimmed. Late as the hour was, he was fully clad in silken kilt and velvet vest, under which gleamed the links of a mail shirt. He dove for a scabbarded sword that lay on the floor beside the couch.

As for the woman, she was not conventionally pretty but still good to look at: red-haired, with a broad, slightly freckled face, and brown eyes sparkling with intelligence.

25

She was rather broadly built, with shoulders wider than the average, a big bust, and full hips. She gave the impression of great physical vigor.

"Help!" shouted Othbaal, rising to meet the Cimmerian's rush. "I am beset!"

Farouz started across the wide floor not more than a step behind Conan, but then leaped back to the door through which they had come. With half an ear, Conan was aware of a commotion in the corridor and heard the thump of some heavy object rammed against the door. Then his blade crossed that of the Anaki. The swords clashed in mid-air, showering sparks, flashing and flickering in the lamplight.

Both men attacked, smiting furiously, each too intent on the life of the other to give much thought to showy swordplay. Each stroke had full weight and murderous will behind it. They fought in silence. As they circled, Conan saw, over Othbaal's shoulder, that Farouz had braced his shoulder against the door. From the other side came increasingly heavy blows, which had already torn loose the bolt. The woman had vanished.

"Can you deal with him?" said Farouz. "If I let this door go, his slaves will pour in."

"All right so far," grunted Conan, parrying a ferocious slash.

"Hasten, then, for I cannot hold them much longer."

Conan plunged in with fresh ferocity. Now it was the Anaki whose attention was devoted to parrying the Cimmerian's sword, which beat on his blade like a hammer on an anvil. The sheer strength and fury of the barbarian began to tell. Othbaal paled under his swarthy skin. His breath came in gasps as he gave ground. Blood streamed from gashes on arms, thigh, and neck. Conan bled, too, but there was no slackening in the headlong fury of his attack.

Othbaal was close to the tapestried wall when sud-

26

denly he sprang aside as Conan lunged. Carried off-balance by his wasted thrust, the Cimmerian plunged forward and his sword point clashed against the stone beneath the tapestries. At the same instant, Othbaal slashed at his foe's head with all his waning power.

But Conan's sword of Stygian steel, instead of snapping like a lesser blade, bent and sprang straight again. The falling scimitar bit through Conan's helmet into the scalp beneath. Before Othbaal could recover his balance, Conan's heavy blade sheared upward through steel links and hip bone to grate into the spinal column.

The Anaki reeled and fell with a choking cry, his entrails spilling out on the floor. His fingers clawed briefly at the nap of the heavy carpet, then went limp.

Conan, blind with blood and sweat, was driving his sword in silent frenzy again and again into the form at his feet, too drunken with fury to realize that his antagonist was dead, until Farouz called:

"Cease, Conan! They've stopped their attack to bring up a heavier ram, and we can run for it."

"How?" said Conan, dazedly raking the blood from his eyes, for he was still dizzy from the stroke that had cloven his helmet. He tore off the riven, blood-filled head-piece and threw it aside, exposing his square-cut black mane. A crimson torrent descended into his face, blinding him anew. He stooped and tore a strip from Othbaal's kilt to bind up his head.

"That door!" said Farouz, pointing. "Rufia fled that way, the slut! If you're ready, we'll run."

Conan saw an inconspicuous little door to one side of the couch. It had been concealed by draperies, but Rufia in her flight had disarranged these and left the door open behind her.

The Hyrkanian took from his girdle the ring that he had pulled from the finger of the black slayer, Keluka. He ran across the floor, dropped the ring near Othbaal's body,

27

and continued on toward the small door. Conan followed him, though he had to crouch and almost turn sideways to get through the door.

They emerged into another corridor. Farouz led Conan by a roundabout route, turning and twisting through a maze of passages, until Conan was hopelessly lost. By this means they avoided the main body of household retainers, gathered in the corridor outside the principal entrance to the room where they had slain Othbaal. Once they aroused feminine screams from a room they passed, but Farouz kept on. Presently they reached the secret panel, entered it, and groped in darkness until they emerged once more into the silent grove.

Conan stopped to get his breath and re-tie his bandage. Farouz said: "How is your wound, brother?"

"A scratch only. Why did you drop that ring?"

"To blind the avengers of blood. Tarim! All that trouble, and the strumpet got away."

Conan grinned wryly in the darkness. Rufia evidently did not regard Farouz as a rescuer. The brief picture that Conan had obtained, in the second before he closed with Othbaal, stuck in his mind. Such a woman, he thought, would suit him very well.

Within the massive wall of the inner city, a stupendous event was coming to pass. Under the shadows of the balconies stole a veiled and hooded figure. For the first time in three years, a woman was walking the streets of Asgalun.

Knowing her peril, she trembled with fear not wholly inspired by the lurking shadows. The stones hurt her feet in her tattered velvet slippers; for three years the cobblers of Asgalun had been forbidden to make street shoes for women. King Akhlrom had decreed that the women of Pelishtia should be shut up like reptiles in cages.

Rufia, the red-haired Ophirean, favorite of Othbaal, 28

had wielded more power than any woman in Pelishtia save Zeriti, the king's witch-mistress. And now, as she stole through the night, an outcast, she thought that burned her like a white-hot brand was the realization that the fruits of all her scheming had been spilt in a second by the sword of one of Othbaal's enemies.

Rufia came of a race of women accustomed to swaying thrones with their beauty and wit. She scarcely remembered her native Ophir from which she had been stolen by Kothian slavers. The Argossean magnate who had bought her and raised her for his household had fallen in battle with the Shemites, and as a supple girl of fourteen Rufia had passed into the hands of a prince of Stygia, a languorous, effeminate youth whom she came to twist around her pink fingers. Then, after some years, had come the raid of a band of wandering freebooters from the half-mythical lands beyond the Sea of Vilayet, upon the prince's pleasure island on the upper Styx, with slaughter, fire, and plunder,

crashing walls and shrieks of death, and a red-haired girl screaming in the arms of a tall Hyrka-nian chieftain.

Because she came of a race whose women were rulers of men, Rufia neither perished nor became a whimpering toy. When Mazdak enlisted his band under Akhirom in Anakia, as part of Akhirom's plan to seize Pelishtia from his hated brother, Rufia had gone along.

She had not liked Mazdak. The sardonic adventurer was coldly masterful in his relations with women, keeping a large harem and letting none command or persuade him in the slightest. Because Rufia could endure no rival, she had not been displeased when Mazdak had gambled her away to his rival Othbaal.

The Anaki was more to her taste. Despite a streak of cruelty and treachery, the man was strong, vital, and intelligent. Best of all, he could be managed. He only needed a spur to his ambition, and Rufia supplied that. She had

29

started him up the shining rungs of the ladder—and no, he had been slain by a pair of masked murderers who had sprung from nowhere.

Engrossed in her bitter thoughts, she looked up with a start as a tall, hooded figure stepped from the shadows of an overhanging balcony and confronted her. Only his eyes burned at her, almost luminous in the starlight. She cowered back with a low cry.

"A woman on the streets of Asgalun!" The voice was hollow and ghostly. "Is this not against the king's commands?"

"I walk not the streets by choice, lord," she answered. "My master has been slain, and I fled from his murderers."

The stranger bent his hooded head and stood statue-like. Rufia watched him nervously. There was something gloomy and portentous about him. He seemed less like a man pondering the tale of a chance-met slave-girl than a somber prophet weighing the doom of a sinful people. At last he lifted his head.

"Come," said he. "I will find a place for you."

Without pausing to see if she obeyed, he stalked away up the street. Rufia hurried after him. She could not walk the streets all night, for any officer of the king would strike off her head for violating the edict of King Akhirom. This stranger might be leading her into worse slavery, but she had no choice.

Several times she tried to speak, but his grim silence struck her silent in turn. His unnatural aloofness frightened her. Once she was startled to see furtive forms stealing after them,

"Men follow us!" she exclaimed.

"Heed them not," answered the man in his weird voice.

Nothing was said until they reached a small arched gate in a lofty wall. The stranger halted and called out. He was answered from within. The gate opened, revealing a black mute holding a torch. In its light, the height of the robed stranger was inhumanly exaggerated.

30

"But this—this is a gate of the Great Palace!" stammered Rufia.

For answer, the man threw back his hood, revealing a long pale oval of a face, in which burned those strange, luminous eyes.

Rufia screamed and fell to her knees. "King Akhirom!"

"Aye, King Akhirom, O faithless and sinful one!" The hollow voice rolled out like a bell. "Vain and foolish woman, who ignores the command of the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of the World, which is the word of the gods! Who treads the street in sin, and sets aside the mandates of the Good King! Seize her!"

The following shadows closed in, becoming a squad of Negro mutes. As their fingers seized her flesh, Rufia fainted.

The Ophirean regained consciousness in a windowless chamber whose arched doors were bolted with bars of gold. She stared wildly about for her captor and shrank down to see him standing above her, stroking his pointed, graying beard while his terrible eyes burned into her soul.

"O Lion of Shem!" she gasped, struggling to her knees. "Mercy!"

As she spoke, she knew the futility of the plea. She was crouching before the man whose name was a curse in the mouths of the Pelishtim; who, claiming divine guidance, had ordered all dogs killed, all vines cut down, all grapes and honey dumped into the river; who had banned all wine, beer, and games of chance; who believed that to disobey his most trivial command was the blackest sin conceivable. He roamed the streets at night in disguise to see that his orders were obeyed. Rufia's flesh crawled as he stared at her with unblinking eyes.

"Blasphemer!" he whispered. "Daughter of evil! O Pteor!" he cried, flinging up his arms. "What punishment shall be devised for this demon? What agony terrible

31

enough, what degradation vile enough to render justice? The gods grant me wisdom!"

Rufia rose to her knees and pointed at Akhirom's face. "Why call on the gods?" she shrieked. "Call on Akhirom! You are a god!"

He stopped, reeled, and cried out incoherently. Then he straightened and looked down at her. Her face was white, her eyes staring. To her natural acting ability was added the terror of her position.

"What do you see, woman?" he asked.

"A god has revealed himself to me! In your face, shining like the sun! I burn, I die in the blaze of thy glory!"

She sank her face in her hands and crouched trembling. Akhirom passed a shaking hand over his brow and bald pate.

"Aye," he whispered. "I am a god! I have guessed it; I have dreamed it. I alone possess the wisdom of the infinite.

Now a mortal has seen it also. I see the truth at last—no mere mouthpiece and servant of the gods, but the God of gods himself! Akhirom is the god of Pe-lishtia; of the earth. The false demon Pteor shall be cast down from his place and his statues melted up . . ."

Bending his gaze downward, he ordered: "Rise, woman, and look upon thy god!"

She did so, shrinking before his awful gaze. A change clouded Akhirom's eyes as he seemed to see her clearly for the first time.

"Your sin is pardoned," he intoned. "Because you were the first to hail your god, you shall henceforth serve me in honor and splendor."

She prostrated herself, kissing the carpet before his feet. He Clapped his hands. A eunuch entered and bowed.

"Go quickly to the house of Abdashtarth, the high priest of Pteor," he said, looking over the servant's head. "Say to him: 'This is the word of Akhirom, who is the one true god of the Pelishtim, and shall soon be the god of all the peoples of the earth: that on the morrow shall

32

be the beginning of beginnings. The idols of the false Pteor shall be destroyed, and statues of the true god shall be erected in their stead. The true religion shall be pro-claimed, and a sacrifice of one hundred of the noblest children of the Pelishtim shall celebrate it . . ."

Before the temple of Pteor stood Mattenbaal, the first assistant to Abdashtarth. The venerable Abdash-tarth, his hands tied, stood quietly in the grip of a pair of brawny Anaki soldiers. His long white beard moved as he prayed. Behind him, other soldiers stoked the fire in the base of the huge, bull-headed idol of Pteor, with his ob-scenely exaggerated male characteristics. In the back-ground towered the great seven-storied zikkurat of As-galun, from which the priests read the will of the gods in the stars.

When the brazen sides of the idol glowed with the heat within, Mattenbaal stepped forward, raised a piece of papyrus, and read:

"For that your divine king, Akhirom, is of the seed of Yakin-Ya, who was descended from the gods when they walked the earth, so is a god this day among ye! And now I command ye, all loyal Pelishtim, to recognize and bow down to and worship the greatest of all gods, the God of gods, the Creator of the Universe, the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom, the king of gods, who is Akhirom the son of Azurnelek, king of Pelishtia! And inasmuch as the wicked and perverse Abdashtarth, in the hardness of his heart, has rejected this revelation and has refused to bow down before his true god, let him be cast into the fire of the idol of the false Pteor!"

A soldier tugged open the brazen door in the belly of the statue. Abdashtarth cried:

"He lies! This king is no god, but a mortal madman! Slay the blasphemers against the true god of the Pelish-tim, the mighty Pteor, lest the all-wise one turn his back upon his people—"

33

At this point, four Anakim picked up Abdashtarth as if he had been a log of wood and hurled him feet-first through the opening. His shriek was cut off by the clang of the closing door, through which these same soldiers had, in times past, tossed hundreds of the children of the Pelishtim in times of crisis under the direction of this same Abdashtarth. Smoke poured from the vents in the statue's ears, while a look of smug satisfaction spread over the face of Mattenbaal.

A great shudder rippled across the throng. Then a frenzied yell broke the stillness. A wild-haired figure ran forward, a half-naked shepherd. With a shriek of "Blas-phemer!" he hurled a stone. The missile struck the new high priest in the mouth, breaking his teeth. Mattenbaal staggered, blood streaming down his beard. With a roar, the mob surged forward. High taxes, starvation, tyranny, rapine, and massacre—all these the Pelishtim had en-dured from their mad king, but this tampering with their religion was the last straw. Staid merchants became mad-men; cringing beggars turned into hot-eyed fiends.

Stones flew like hail, and louder rose the roar of the mob. Hands were clutching at the garments of the dazed Mattenbaal when the armored Anakim closed in around him, beat the mob back with bowstaves and spear shafts, and hustled the priest away.

With a clanking of weapons and a jingling of bridle chains, a troop of Kushite horse, resplendent in head-dresses of ostrich feathers and lions' manes and corselets of silvered scales, galloped out of one of the streets lead-ing into the great Square of Pteor. Their white teeth shone in their dark faces. The stones of the mob bounced off their bucklers of rhinoceros hide. They urged their horses into the press, slashing with curved blades and thrusting long knees through the bodies of the Asgalunim. Men rolled howling under the stamping hooves. The rioters gave way, fleeing wildly into shops and alleys, leaving the square littered with writhing bodies.

34

The black riders leaped from their saddles and began crashing in the doors of shops and dwellings and heap-ing their arms with plunder. Screams of women sounded from within the houses. A crash of latticework, and a white-clad body struck the street with bone-crushing impact. Another horseman, laughing, passed his lance through the body as it lay.

The giant Imbalayo, in flaming silk and polished steel, rode roaring among his men, beating them into order with a heavy leaded ship. They mounted and swung into line behind him. In a canter they swept off down the street, gory human heads bobbing on their lances as an object lesson to the maddened Asgalunim

who crouched in their coverts, panting with hate.

The breathless eunuch who brought news of the uprising to King Akhirom was swiftly followed by another, who prostrated himself and cried: "O divine king, the general Othbaal is dead! His servants found him murdered in his palace, and beside him the ring of Keluka the Swordsman. Wherefore the Anakim cry out that he was murdered by the order of the general Imbalayo. They search for Keluka in the Kushites' quarter and fight with the Kushites!"

Rufia, listening behind a curtain, stifled a cry. Akhirom's faraway gaze did not alter. Wrapped in aloofness he replied:

"Let the Hyrkanians separate them. Shall private quarrels interfere with the destiny of a god? Othbaal is dead, but Akhirom lives forever. Another man shall lead my Anakim. Let the Kushites handle the mob until they realize the sin of their atheism. My destiny is to reveal myself to the world in blood and fire, until all the tribes of the earth know me and bow down before me! You may go."

Night was falling on a tense city as Conan, his head wound now healed, strode through the streets adjoining the quarter of the Kushites. In that section, occupied

35

mostly by soldiers, lights shone and stalls were open by tacit agreement. All day, revolt had rumbled in the quarters. The mob was like a thousand-headed serpent; stamp it out here and it broke out there. The hooves of the Kushites had clattered from one end of the city to the other, spattering blood.

Only armed men now traversed the streets. The great iron-bound wooden gates of the quarters were locked as in times of civil war. Through the lowering arch of the great gate of Simura came troops of black horsemen, the torchlight crimsoning their naked scimitars. Their silken cloaks flowed in the wind, and their black arms gleamed like polished ebony.

Conan entered a cookshop where girdled warriors gorged and secretly guzzled forbidden wine. Instead of taking the first place open he stood, head up, his smoldering eyes roaming the place. His gaze came to rest on a far corner where a plainly-dressed man with a kaffia pulled well down over his face sat cross-legged on the floor in a dim alcove. A low table of food stood on the floor in front of the man.

Conan strode across, swerving around the other tables. He kicked a cushion into the alcove opposite the seated man and dropped down upon it.

"Greetings, Farouz!" he rumbled. "Or should I say General Mazdak?"

The Hyrkanian started. "What's that?"

Conan grinned wolfishly. "I knew you when we entered the house of Othbaal. No one but the master of the house could know its secrets so well, and that house had once belonged to Mazdak the Hyrkanian."

"Not so loud, friend! How did you pick me out when my own men don't know me in this Zuagir's headcloth?"

"I used my eyes. Well, now that our first venture has paid us so well, what shall we do next?"

"I know not. I should be able to do something with one 36 of your brawn and force. But you know how it is with the dog-brothers."

"Aye," snarled Conan. "I tried to get mercenary service, but your three rival armies hate each other so and strive so fiercely for the rule of the state that none will have me. Each thinks I'm a spy for one of the other two." He paused to order a joint of beef.

"What a restless dog you are!" said Mazdak. "Will you then go back to Akkharia?"

Conan spat. "Nay. It's small, even for one of these little Shemitish fly-specks of a state, and has no great wealth. And the people are as crazily touchy about their racial and national pride as you all are here, so I couldn't hope to rise very high. Perhaps I'd do better under one of the Hyborian rulers to the north, if I could find one who'd pick men for fighting ability only. But look you, Mazdak, why don't you seize the rule of this nation for yourself? Now that Othbaal's gone, you have only to find an excuse for putting a blade into Imbalayo's guts, and . . ."

"*Tarim!* I'm as ambitious as the next man, but not so headlong as that! Know that Imbalayo, having gotten the confidence of our mad monarch, dwells in the Great Palace, surrounded by his black swordsmen. Not that one could not kill him by a sudden stab during some public function—if one did not mind being cut to bits instantly afterward. And then where's ambition?"

"We should be able to think up something," said Conan, eyes narrowed.

"We, eh? I suppose you'd expect a reward for your part?"

"Of course. What sort of fool do you think me?"

"No more foolish than the next. I see no immediate prospect of such an enterprise, but I'll bear your words in mind. And fear not but that you'd be well repaid. Now fare you well, for I must go back into the toils of politics."

Conan's joint arrived as Mazdak left. Conan dug his 37 teeth into the meat with even more than his usual gusto, for the success of his vengeance had made his spirits soar. While devouring a mass that would have satisfied a lion, he listened to the talk around him.

"Where are the Anakim?" demanded a mustached Hyrkanian, cramming his jaws with almond cakes.

"They sulk in their quarter," answered another. "They swear the Kushites slew Othbaal and show Keluka's ring to prove it. Keluka has disappeared, and Imbalayo swears he knows naught of it. But there's the ring, and a dozen had

been slain in brawls when the king ordered us to beat them apart. By Asura, this has been a day of days!"

"Akhirom's madness brought it on," declared another in a lowered voice. "How soon before this lunatic dooms us all by some crazy antic?"

"Careful," cautioned his mate. "Our swords are his as long as Mazdak orders. But if revolt breaks out again, the Anakim are more likely to fight against the Kushites than with them. Men say Akhirom has taken Othbaal's concubine Rufia into his harem. That angers the Anakim the more, for they suspect that Othbaal was slain by the king's orders, or at least with his consent. But their anger is naught beside that of Zeriti, whom the king has put aside. The rage of the witch, they say, makes the sand-storm of the desert seem like a spring breeze."

Conan's moody blue eyes blazed as he digested this news. The memory of the red-haired wench had stuck in his mind during the last few days. The thought of stealing her out from under the nose of the mad king, and keeping her out of sight of her former owner Mazdak, gave spice to life. And, if he had to leave Asgalun, she would make a pleasant companion on the long road to Koth. In Asgalun there was one person who could best help him in this enterprise: Zeriti the Stygian, and if he could guess human motives she would be glad to do so.

He left the shop and headed towards the wall of the inner city. Zeriti's house, he knew, was in this part of

38

Asgalun. To get to it he would have to pass the great wall, and the only way he knew of doing this without discovery was through the tunnel that Mazdak had shown him.

Accordingly, he approached the canal and made his way to the grove of palms near the shore. Groping in the darkness among the marble ruins, he found and lifted the skb. Again he advanced through blackness and dripping water, stumbled on the other stair, and mounted it. He found the catch and emerged into the corridor, now dark. The house was silent, but the reflection of lights elsewhere showed that it was still occupied, doubtless by the slain general's servants and women.

Uncertain as to which way led to the outer stair, he set off at random, passed through a curtained archway—and confronted six black slaves who sprang up glaring. Before he could retreat, he heard a shout and a rush of feet behind him. Cursing his luck, he ran straight at the blacks. A whirl of steel and he was through, leaving a writhing form on the floor behind him, and dashed through a doorway on the other side of the room. Curved blades sought his back as he slammed the door behind him. Steel rang on the wood and glittering points showed through the panels. He shot the bolt and whirled, glaring about for an exit. His gaze found a gold-barred window.

With a headlong rush, he launched himself full at the window. The soft bars tore out with a crash, taking half the casement with them, before the impact of his hurtling body. He shot through space as the door crashed inward and howling figures flooded into the room.

In the Great East Palace, where slave-girls and eunuchs glided on bare feet, no echo reverberated of the hell that seethed outside the walls. In a chamber whose dome was of gold-filagreed ivory, King Akhirom, clad in a white silken robe that made him look even more ghostly, sat cross-legged on a couch of gemmed ivory and stared at Rufia kneeling before him.

39

Rufia wore a robe of crimson silk and a girdle of satin sewn with pearls. But amidst all this splendor, the Ophi-rean's eyes were shadowed. She had inspired Akhirom's latest madness, but she had not mastered him. Now he seemed withdrawn, with an expression in his cold eyes that made her shudder. Abruptly he spoke:

"It is not meet for a god to mate with mortals."

Rufia started, opened her mouth, then feared to speak.

"Love is a human weakness," he continued. "I will cast it from me. Gods are beyond love. Weakness assails me when I lie in your arms."

"What do you mean, my lord?" she ventured.

"Even the gods must sacrifice, and therefore I give you up, lest my divinity weaken." He clapped his hands, and a eunuch entered on all fours. "Send in the general Im-balayo," ordered Akhirom, and the eunuch banged his head against the floor and crawled out backwards. These were the most recently instituted customs of the court.

"Nol" Rufia sprang up. "You cannot give me to that beast—" She fell to her knees, catching at his robe, which he drew back from her.

"Woman!" he thundered. "Are you mad? Would you assail a god?"

Imbalayo entered uncertainly. A warrior of barbaric Darfar, he had risen to his present high estate by wild fighting and crafty intrigue. But shrewd, brawny, and fearless though the Negro was, he could not be sure of the mad Akhirom's intentions from moment to moment.

The king pointed to the woman cowering at his feet. "Take her!"

Imbalayo grinned and caught up Rufia, who writhed and screamed in his grasp. She stretched her arms towards Akhirom as Imbalayo bore her from the chamber. But Akhirom answered not, sitting with hands folded and gaze detached.

Another heard. Crouching in an alcove, a slim brown-skinned girl watched the grinning Kushite carry his cap-

40

tive up the hall. Scarcely had he vanished when she fled in another direction.

Imbalayo, the favored of the king, alone of the generals dwelt in the Great Palace. This was really an aggregation of buildings united into one great structure and housing the three thousand servants of Akhirom. Following winding corridors, crossing an occasional court paved with mosaics, he came to his own dwelling in the southern wing. But

even as he came in sight of the door of teak, banded with arabesques of copper, a supple form barred his way.

"Zeriti!" Imbalayo recoiled in awe. The hands of the handsome, brown-skinned woman clenched and un-clenched in controlled passion.

"A servant brought me word that Akhirom has discarded the red-haired slut," said the Stygian. "Sell her to me! I owe her a debt that I would pay."

"Why should I?" said the Kushite, fidgeting impatiently. "The king has given her to me. Stand aside, lest I hurt you."

"Have you heard what the Anakim shout in the streets?"

"What is that to me?"

"They howl for the head of Imbalayo, because of the murder of Othbaal. What if I told them their suspicions were true?"

"I had naught to do with it!" he shouted.

"I can produce men to swear they saw you help Keluka cut him down."

"I'll kill you, witch!"

She kughed. "You dare not! Now will you sell me the red-haired jade, or will you fight the Anakim?"

Imbalayo let Rufia slip to the floor. "Take her and be-gone!" he snarled.

Take your pay!" she retorted and hurled a handful of coins into his face. Imbalayo's eyes burned red and his hands opened and closed with suppressed blood-lust

41

Ignoring him, Zeriti bent over Rufia, who crouched, dazed with the hopeless realization that against this new possessor the wiles she played against men were useless. Zeriti gathered the Ophirean's red locks in her fingers and forced her head back, to stare fiercely into her eyes. Then she clapped her hands. Four eunuchs entered.

"Take her to my house," Zeriti ordered, and they bore the shrinking Rufia away. Zeriti followed, breathing softly between her teeth.

When Conan plunged through the window, he had no idea of what lay in the darkness ahead of him. Shrubs broke his crashing fall. Springing up, he saw his pursuers crowding through the window he had just shattered. He was in a garden, a great shadowy place of trees and ghostly blossoms. His hunters blundered among the trees while he reached the wall unopposed. He sprang high, caught the coping with one hand, and heaved himself up and over.

He halted to locate himself. Though he had never been in the inner city, he had heard it described often enough so that he carried a mental map of it. He was in the Quar-ter of the Officials. Ahead of him, over the flat roofs, loomed a structure that must be the Lesser West Palace, a great pleasure house giving into the famous Garden of Abibaal. Sure of his ground, he hurried along the street into which he had dropped and soon emerged on the broad thoroughfare that traversed the inner city from north to south.

Late as it was, there was much stirring abroad. Armed Hyrkanians strode past. In the great square between the two palaces, Conan heard the jingle of reins on restive horses and saw a squadron of Kushite troopers sitting their steeds under the torchlight. There was reason for their alertness. Far away he heard tom-toms drumming sullenly among the quarters. The wind brought snatches of wild song and distant yells. 42

With his soldierly swagger, Conan passed unnoticed among the mailed figures. When he plucked the sleeve of a Hyrkanian to ask the way to Zeriti's house, the man

readily gave him the information. Conan, like everyone else in Asgalun, knew that however much the Stygian re-garded Akhirom as her personal property, she by no means considered herself his exclusive possession in return. There were mercenary captains as familiar with her cham-bers as was the king of Pelishtia.

Zeriti's house adjoined a court of the East Palace, to whose gardens it was connected so that Zeriti, in the days of her favor, could pass from her house to the palace without violating the king's order for the seclusion of women. Zeriti, the daughter of a free chieftain, had been Akhirom's mistress but not his slave.

Conan did not expect difficulty in gaining entrance to her house. She pulled hidden strings of intrigue and politics, and men of all races and conditions were admitted to her audience chamber, where dancing girls and the fumes of the black lotus offered entertainment. That night there were no dancing girls or guests, but a villainous-looking Zuagir opened the arched door under a burning cresset and admitted Conan without question. He showed Conan across a small court, up an outer stair, down a cor-ridor, and into a broad chamber bordered by fretted arches hung with curtains of crimson velvet.

The softly lit room was empty, but somewhere sounded the scream of a woman in pain. Then came a peal of musical laughter, also feminine, indescribably vindictive and malicious.

Conan jerked his head to catch the direction of the sounds. Then he began examining the drapes behind the arches to see which of them concealed doors.

Zeriti straightened up from her task and dropped the heavy whip. The naked figure bound to the divan was

crossed by red weals from neck to ankles. This, however, was but a prelude to a more ghastly fate.

The witch took from a cabinet a piece of charcoal, with which she drew a complex figure on the floor, adding words in the mysterious glyphs of the serpent-folk who ruled Stygia before the Cataclysm. She set a small golden lamp at each of the five corners of the figure and tossed into the flame of each a pinch of the pollen of the purple lotus, which grows in the swamps of southern Stygia. A strange smell, sickeningly sweet, pervaded the chamber. Then she began to incant in a language that was old before purple-towered Python rose in the lost empire of Acheron, over three thousand years before.

Slowly a dark something took form. To Rufia, half dead with pain and fright, it seemed like a pillar of cloud. High up in the amorphous mass appeared a pair of glowing points that might have been eyes. Rufia felt an all-pervading cold, as if the thing were drawing all the heat out of her body by its mere presence. The cloud gave the impression of being black without much density. Rufia could see the wall behind it through the shapeless mass, which slowly thickened.

Zeriti bent and snuffed out the lamps—one, two, three, four. The room, lit by the remaining lamp, was now dim. The pillar of smoke was hardly discernible except for the glowing eyes.

A sound made Zeriti turn: a distant, muffled roar, faint and far-off but of vast volume. It was the bestial howling of many men.

Zeriti resumed her incantation, but there came another interruption: angry words and the voice of the Zuagir, a cry, the crunch of a savage blow, and the thud of a body. Imbalayo burst in, a wild-looking figure with his eyeballs and teeth gleaming in the light of the single lamp and blood dripping from his scimitar.

"Dog!" exclaimed the Stygian, drawing herself up like a serpent from its coil. "What do you here?"

44

The woman' you took from me!" roared Imbakyo. The city has risen and all Hell is loose! Give me the woman before I kill you!"

Zeriti glanced at her rival and drew a jeweled dagger, crying: "Hotep! .Khafra! Help me!"

With a roar, the black general lunged. The Stygian's supple quickness was futile; the broad blade plunged through her body, standing out a foot between her shoulders. With a choking cry she stumbled, and the Kushite wrenched his scimitar free as she fell. At that instant Conan appeared at the door, sword in hand.

Evidently taking the Cimmerian for one of the witch's servants, the Kushite bounded across the floor, his saber whistling in a fearful slash. Conan leaped back; the sword missed his throat by a finger's breadth and nicked the doorframe. As he leaped, Conan struck backhanded in return. It was incredible that the black giant should recover from his missed cut in time to parry, but Imbalayo somehow twisted his body, arm, and blade all at once to catch a blow that would have felled a lesser man by sheer impact.

Back and forth they surged, swords clanging. Then recognition dawned in Imbakyo's features. He fell back with a cry of "Amra!"

Now Conan knew that he must kill this man. Though he did not remember ever seeing him before, the Kushite had recognized him as the leader of a crew of black corsairs who, under the name of Amra, the Lion, had plundered the coasts of Kush and Stygia and Shem. If Imbakyo revealed Conan's identity to the Pelishtim, the vengeful Shemites would tear Conan apart with their bare hands if need be. Bitterly though the Shemites fought among themselves, they would unite to destroy the red-handed barbarian who had raided their coast.

Conan lunged and drove Imbakyo back a step, fainted, and struck at the Kushite's head. The force of the blow beat down Imbakyo's scimitar and came down stunningly

45

on the bronze helmet—and Conan's sword, weakened by deep notches in the blade, broke off short.

For the space of two heartbeats, the two barbarian-warriors confronted each other. Imbalayo's bloodshot eyes sought a vulnerable spot on Conan's form; his muscles tensed for a final, fatal spring and slash.

Conan hurled his hilt at Imbalayo's head. As the Kushite ducked the missile, Conan whirled his cloak around his left forearm and snatched out his poniard with his right hand. He had no illusions about his chances with Imbalayo in this Zingaran-style fighting. The Kushite, now stalking forward on the balls of his feet like a cat, was no slow-moving mountain of muscle like Keluka, but a superbly-thewed fighting machine almost as lightning-fast as Conan himself. The scimitar whipped up . . .

And a shapeless mass of cloudy something, hitherto un-noticed in the gloom, swept forward and fastened itself on Imbalayo's back. Imbalayo screamed like a man being roasted alive. He kicked and squirmed and tried to reach back with his sword. But the luminous eyes glowed over his shoulder and the smoky substance lapped around him, drawing him slowly backwards.

Conan reeled back from the sight, his barbarian's fears of the supernatural rising like a choking lump in his throat,

Imbalayo's shrieks ceased. The black body slid to the ground with a soft, squashy sound. The cloudy thing was gone.

Conan advanced cautiously. Imbalayo's body had a curiously pallid, collapsed appearance, as if the demon had extracted all the bones and blood, leaving only a man-shaped bag of skin with a few organs inside it. The Cimmerian shuddered.

A sob from the divan called his attention to Rufia. With two strides he reached her and cut her bonds. She sat up, weeping silently, when a voice shouted:

46

"Imbalayo! In the name of all the fiends, where are you? It's time to mount and ride! I saw you run in

here!"

A mailed and helmeted figure dashed into the chamber. Mazdak recoiled at the sight of the bodies and cried: "Oh, you cursed savage, why must you slay Imbalayo at this time? The city has risen. The Anakim are fighting the Kushites, who had their hands full already. I ride with my men to aid the Kushites. As for you—I still owe you my life, but there's a limit to all things! Get out of this city and never let me see you again!"

Conan grinned. "It wasn't I who killed him, but one of Zeriti's demons after he slew the witch. Look at his body if you don't believe me." As Mazdak bent to see, Conan added: "And have you no greeting for your old friend Rufia?"

Rufia had been cowering behind Conan. Mazdak plucked at his mustache. "Good. I'll take her back to my house; we have—"

The distant roaring of the mob became louder.

"No," said Mazdak distractedly. "I must go to put down the sedition. But how can I leave her to wander the streets naked?"

Conan said: "Why not throw in your lot with the Ana-kim, who will be as glad to get rid of this mad king as are the Asgalunim? With Imbalayo and Othbaal dead, you're the only general alive in Asgalun. Become leader of the revolt, put down the crazy Akhirom, and set some feeble cousin or nephew in his place. Then you'll be the real ruler of Pelishtia!"

Mazdak, listening like a man in a dream, gave a sudden shout of laughter. "Done!" he cried. "To horse! Take Rufia to my house, then join the Hyrkanians in battle. Tomorrow I shall rule Pelishtia, and you may ask of me what you will. Farewell for now!"

Off went the Hyrkanian with a swirl of his cloak. Conan turned to Rufia. "Get some clothes, wench."

47

"Who are you? I heard Imbalayo call you Amra . . ."

"Don't say that name in Shem! I am Oman, a Cimme-rian."

"Conan? I heard you spoken of when I was intimate with the king. Do not take me to Mazdak's house!"

"Why not? He'll be the real ruler of Pelishtia."

"I know that cold snake too well. Take me with you in-stead! Let's loot this house and flee the city. With all this uproar, nobody will stop us."

Conan grinned. "You tempt me, Rufia, but it's worth too much to me right now to keep on Mazdak's good side. Besides, I told him I would deliver you, and I like to keep my word. Now get into a garment or I'll drag you as you are."

"Well," said Rufia in a temporizing tone, but then stopped.

A gurgling sound came from the sprawled body of Zeriti. As Conan watched with his hair standing up in horror, the witch slowly rose to a sitting position, despite a wound that any fighter would have said would be instantly fatal. She struggled to her feet and stood, swaying, regarding Conan and Rufia. A little blood ran down from the wounds in her back and chest. When she spoke, it was in a voice choked with blood.

"It takes—more than—a sword-thrust—to kill—a daughter of Set." She reeled towards the door. In the doorway she turned back to gasp: "The Asgalunim—will be interested to know—that Amra and his woman—are in their city,"

Conan stood irresolutely, knowing that for his own safety he ought to rush upon the witch and hew her in pieces, but restrained by his rude barbarian's chivalry from attacking a woman.

"Why bother us?" he burst out. "You can have your mad king back!"

Zeriti shook her head. "I know—what Mazdak plans."

48

And ere I quit this body—for good—I win have—my re-venge—on this drab."

"Then—" growled Conan, snatching up Imbalayo's scimitar and starting towards the witch. But Zeriti made a gesture and spoke a word. A line of flame appeared across the floor between Conan and the doorway, extending from wall to wall. Conan recoiled, throwing up a hand to shade his face from the fierce heat. Then Zeriti was gone.

"After her!" cried Rufia. "The fire is but one of her illusions."

"But if she can't be killed—"

"Nevertheless, heads do not tell secrets when sundered from their bodies."

Grimly, Conan rushed for the exit, leaping across the line of flame. There was an instant of heat, and then the flames vanished as he passed through them.

"Wait here!" he barked at Rufia, and ran after Zeriti.

But when he reached the street, there was no witch to be seen. He ran to the nearest alley and looked up it, then to the alley in the opposite direction. Still there was no sign of her.

In seconds he was back in Zeriti's house. "You were right the first time," he grunted at Rufia. "Let's grab what we can and go."

In the great Square of Adonis, the tossing torches blazed on a swirl of straining figures, screaming horses, and lashing blades. Men fought hand-to-hand: Kushites and Shemites, gasping, cursing, and dying. Like madmen the Asgalunim grappled the black warriors, dragging them from their saddles, slashing the girths of the frenzied horses. Rusty pikes clanged against lances. Fire burst out here and there, mounting into the skies until the shep-herds on the Libnun Hills gaped in wonder. From the suburbs poured a torrent of figures converging on the

49

great square. Hundreds of still shapes, in mail or striped robes, lay under the trampling hooves, and over them the

living screamed and hacked.

The square lay in the Kushite quarter, into which the Anakim had come ravening while the bulk of the Negroes had been fighting the mob elsewhere. Now withdrawn in haste to their own quarter, the ebony swordsmen were overwhelming the Anakian infantry by sheer numbers, while the mob threatened to engulf both bodies. Under their captain, Bombaata, the Kushites retained a sem-blance of order that gave them an advantage over the unorganized Anakim and the leaderless mob. Their squadrons clattered back and forth across the square, charging to keep a space clear in the midst of the swarm-ing thousands, so that they could use their horses to ad-vantage.

Meanwhile the maddened Asgalunim were smashing and plundering the houses of the blacks, dragging forth howling women. The blaze of burning buildings made the square swim in an ocean of fire, while the shrieks of their women and children as they were torn to pieces by the Shemites made the Negroes fight with even more than their usual ferocity.

Somewhere arose the whirl of Hyrkanian kettledrums above the throb of many hooves.

"The Hyrkanians at last!" panted Bombaata. "They've loitered long enough. And where in Derketa's name is Imbalayo?"

Into the square raced a frantic, horse, foam flying from its bit rings. The rider, reeling in the saddle, screamed: "Bombaata! Bombaata!" as he clung to the mane with bloody hands.

"Here, fool!" roared the Kushite, catching the other's bridle.

"Imbalayo is dead!" shrieked the man above the roar of the flames and the rising thunder of the kettledrums.

50

"The Hyrkanians have turned against us! They have slain our brothers in the palaces! Here they come!"

With a deafening thunder of hooves and drums, the squadrons of mailed lancers burst upon the square, riding down friend and foe. Bombaata saw the lean, exultant face of Mazdak beneath the blazing arc of his scimitar, and then a sword fell and the Kushite with it.

On the rocky spurs of Libnun the herdsmen watched and shivered, and the clangor of swords was heard miles up the river, where pallid nobles trembled in their gar-dens. Hemmed in by mailed Hyrkanians, furious Anakim, and shrieking Asgalunim, the Kushites died fighting to a man.

It was the mob that first turned its attention to Akhl-rom. They rushed through the unguarded gates into the inner city, and through the great bronze doors of the East Palace. Ragged hordes streamed yelling down the corri-dors through the Golden Gates into the great Golden Hall, tearing aside the curtain of cloth-of-gold to reveal an empty throne. Silken tapestries were ripped from the walls by grimed and bloody fingers. Sardonyx tables were overthrown with a clatter of golden vessels. Eunuchs in crimson robes fled squeaking, and slave-girls shrieked in the hands of ravishers.

In the Great Emerald Hall, King Akhirom stood like a statue on a fur-strewn dais, his white hands twitching. At the entrance to the hall clustered a handful of his faithful servants, beating back the mob with swords. A band of Anakim plowed through the throng and burst the barrier of black slaves. As the wedge of swarthy Shemitish sol-diers clattered forward, Akhirom seemed to come to him-self. He dashed to an exit in the rear. Anakim and Pelishtim, mingling as they ran, chased the fleeing king. After them came a band of Hyrkanians with the blood-splashed Mazdak at their head.

Akhirom ran down a corridor, then turned aside to dash

51

up a winding stair. The stair curled up and up until it came out on the roof of the pakce. But it did not stop there; it continued on up into the slender spire that rose from the roof, from which Akhirom's father, King Azumelek, had observed the stars.

Up went Akhirom, and after him came the pursuers, until the stair became so narrow that only one man could negotiate it, and the pursuit slowed for lack of breath.

King Akhirom came out on the small circular platform at the top of the tower, "unrounded by a low wall. He slammed down the stone trapdoor and bolted it. Then he leaned over the wall. Men swarmed on the roof, and be-low them others gazed up from the main courtyard.

"Sinful mortals!" screeched Akhirom. "Tou do not be-lieve I am a god! I will show you! I am not bound to the surface of the earth as worms like you are, but can soar through the heavens like a bird! You shall see, and then you will bow down and worship me as you ought! Here I go!"

Akhirom climbed to the top of the wall, balanced an instant, and dove off, spreading his arms like wings. His body described a long, steep parabola downward, missing the edge of the roof and plunging on down, the wind whistling in his garments, until he struck the stones of the courtyard below with the sound of a melon hit by a sledgehammer.

Not even the extermination of the Kushites and the death of Akhirom brought peace to troubled Asgalun. Other mobs roamed the city, incited by a mysterious rumor that Amra, the pirate chief of the black corsairs, was there, and that the Ophirean woman Rufia was with him. The rumors grew and changed with each retelling until men said that Amra had sent Rufia to Asgalun as a spy for the pirates, and that a pirate navy was waiting off the coast for word from Amra to march overland against the city. But, though they

combed the whole town over, no sign did the searchers find of Amra and his doxy.

52

North from Asgalon, through the meadowlands of western Shem, ran the long road to Koth. Along this road, as the sun rose, Conan and Rufia rode at a canter. Conan bestrode his own horse; the Ophirean woman, a riderless horse which Conan had caught on the streets of Asgalun that night. She wore clothes from the chests of Zeriti—tight for her full figure, but adequate.

Rufia said: "If you had stayed in Asgalun, Conan, you could have risen high under Mazdak."

"And who begged me not to turn her back to him?"

"I know. He was a cold, unfeeling master. But . . ."

"Besides, I rather liked the fellow. If I had stayed there, sooner or later one of us would have had to kill the other over you." The Cimmerian chuckled and slapped the bag of loot from Zeriti's house, so that the coins and ornaments jingled. "I shall do as well in the North. Come on there, beat some speed out of that nag!"

"But I'm still sore where she beat me—"

"If you don't hurry, I'll see that you get even sorer. Do you want Mazdak's Hyrkanians to catch us before we've even had breakfast?"

53

The Road of the Eagles

As chieftain of this mongrel Red Brotherhood, Co-nan is more than ever a thorn in King Yildiz's sensitive flesh. That henpecked monarch, instead of strangling his brother Teyaspa in the approved Turanian manner, has been prevailed upon to keep him cooped up in a castle deep in the Colchian Mountains, south-east of Vilayet, as a prisoner of the Zaporoskan brig-and-gleg. To rid himself of another embarrassment, Yildiz sends one of Teyaspa's strongest partisans, General Artaban, to destroy the pirate stronghold at the mouth of the Zaporoska River. This he does, but he becomes the harried instead of the harrier.

The loser of the sea fight wallowed in the crimson wash. Just out of bow-shot, the winner limped away toward the rugged hills that overhung the blue water. It was a scene common enough on the Sea of Vilayet in the reign of King Yildiz of Turan.

The ship heeling drunkenly in the blue waste was a high-beaked Turanian war galley, a sister to the other. On the loser, death had reaped a plentiful harvest. Dead men sprawled on the high poop; they hung loosely over the scarred rail; they slumped along the runway that bridged the waist, where the mangled oarsmen lay among their broken benches.

Clustered on the poop stood the survivors, thirty men, many dripping blood. They were men of many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shem-ites, Zaporoskans. Their features were those of wild

138

men, and many bore the scars of lash or branding iron. Many were half naked, but the motley clothes they wore were often of good quality, though now stained with tar and blood. Some were bareheaded, while others wore steel caps, fur caps, or strips of cloth wound turbanwise about their heads. Some wore shirts of chain mail; others were naked to their sash-girt waists, their muscular arms and shoulders burnt almost black. Jewels glittered in earrings and the hilts of daggers. Naked swords were in their hands. Their dark eyes were restless.

They stood about a man bigger than any of them, almost a giant, with thickly corded muscles. A square-cut mane of black hair surmounted his broad, low forehead, and the eyes that blazed in his dark, scarred face were a volcanic blue.

These eyes now stared at the shore. No town or harbor was visible along this stretch of lonely coast between Kha-warism, the southernmost outpost of the Turanian kingdom, and its capital of Aghrapur. From the shoreline rose tree-covered hills, climbing swiftly to the snow-tipped peaks of the Colchians in the distance, on which the sinking sun shone red.

The big man glared at the slowly receding galley. Its crew had been glad to break away from the death grapple, and it crawled toward a creek that wound out of the hills between high cliffs. On the poop, the pirate captain could still make out a tall figure on whose helmet the low sun sparkled. He remembered, the features under that helmet, glimpsed in the frenzy of battle: hawk-nosed, black-bearded, with slanting black eyes. That was Artaban of Shahpur, until recently the scourge of the Sea of Vilayet.

A lean Corinthian spoke: "We almost had the devil. What shall we do now, Oman?"

The gigantic Cimmerian went to one of the steering-sweeps. "Ivanos," he addressed the one who had spoken, "you and Hermio take the other sweep. Medius, pick three besides yourself and start bailing. The rest of you

139

dog-souk tie up your cuts and then go down into the waist and bend your backs on the oars. Throw as many stiff boards as you need to make room."

"Are you going to follow the other galley to the creek-mouth?" asked Ivanos.

"Nay. We're too waterlogged from the holing their ram gave us to risk another grapple. But if we pull hard, we can beach her on that headland."

Laboriously they worked the galley inshore. The sun set; a haze like soft blue smoke hovered over the dusky water.

Their late antagonist vanished into the creek. The starboard rail was almost awash when the bottom of the pirates' galley grounded on the sand and gravel of the head-land.

The Akrim River, which wound through patches of meadow and farmland, was tinged red, and the mountains that rose on either side of the valley looked down on a scene only less old than they. Horror had come upon the peaceful valley dwellers, in the shape of wolfish riders from the outlands. They did not turn their gaze toward the castle that hung on the sheer slope of the mountains, for there too lurked oppressors.

The clan of Kurush Khan, a subchief of one of the more barbarous Hyrkanian tribes from east of the Sea of Vilayet, had been driven westward out of its native steppes by a tribal feud. Now it was raking toll of the Yuetschi villages in the valley of Akrim. Though this was mainly a simple raid for cattle, slaves, and plunder, Kurush Khan had wider ambitions. Kingdoms had been carved out of these hills before.

However, just now, like his warriors, Kurush Khan was drunk with slaughter. The huts of the Yuetschi lay in smoking ruins. The barns had been spared because they contained fodder, as well as the ricks. Up and down the valley the lean riders raced, stabbing and loosing their barbed arrows. Men howled as the steel drove home;

140

women screamed as they were jerked naked across the raiders' saddle bows.

Horsemen in sheepskins and high fur caps swarmed in the streets of the largest village—a squalid cluster of huts, half mud, half stone. Routed out of their pitiful hiding places, the villagers knelt, vainly imploring mercy, or as vainly fled, to be ridden down as they ran. The yataghans whistled, ending in the *zhukk* of cloven flesh and bone.

A fugitive turned with a wild cry as Kurush Khan swooped down on him with his cloak spreading out in the wind like the wings of a hawk. In that instant the eyes of the Yuetschi saw, as in a dream, the bearded face with its thin, down-curving nose, the wide sleeve falling away from the arm that rose grasping a curving glitter of steel. The Yuetschi carried one of the few effective weapons in the valley: a heavy hunting bow with a single arrow. With a screech of desperation he knocked the arrow, drew, and loosed, just as the Hyrkanian struck at him in passing. The arrow thudded home and Kurush Khan tumbled out of the saddle, instantly dead from a cloven heart.

As the riderless horse raced away, one of the two figures drew itself up on one elbow. It was the Yuetschi, whose life was welling fast from a ghastly cut across neck and shoulder. Gasping, he looked at the other form. Kurush Khan's beard jutted upwards as if in comic surprise. The Yuetschi's arm gave way and his face fell into the dirt, filling his mouth with dust. He spat red, gave a ghastly laugh from frothy lips, and fell back. When the Hyrkanians reached the spot, he, too, was dead.

The Hyrkanians squatted like vultures about a dead sheep and conversed over the body of their khan. When they rose, the doom had been sealed of every Yuetschi in the valley of Akrim.

Granaries, ricks, and stables, spared by Kurush Khan, went up in flames. All prisoners were slain, infants tossed living into the flames, young girls ripped up and flung

141

into the bloody streets. Beside the khan's corpse grew a heap of severed heads. Riders galloped up, swinging these trophies by the hair, to toss them on the grim pyramid. Every place that might hide a shuddering wretch was ripped apart.

One tribesman, prodding into a stack of hay, discerned a movement in the straw. With a wolfish yell, he pounced upon the stack and dragged his victim to light. It was a girl, and no dumpy, apelike Yuetschi woman either. Tear-ing off her cloak, the Hyrkanian feasted his eyes on her scantily covered beauty.

The girl struggled silently in his grip. He dragged her toward his horse. Then, quick and deadly as a cobra, she snatched a dagger from his girdle and sank it under his heart. With a groan he crumpled, and she sprang like a she-leopard to his horse. The steed neighed and reared, and she wrenched it about and raced up the valley. Behind her the pack gave tongue and streamed out in pur-suit. Arrows whistled about her head.

She guided the horse straight at the mountain wall on the south of the valley, where a narrow canyon opened out. Here the going was perilous, and the Hyrkanians reined to a less headlong pace among the stones and boulders. But the girl rode like a windblown leaf and was leading them by several hundred paces, when she came to a low wall or barrier across the mouth of the canyon, as if at some time somebody had rolled boulders together to make a crude defense. Feathery tamarisks grew out of the ridge, and a small stream cut through a narrow notch in the center. Men were there.

She saw them among the rocks, and they shouted to her to halt. At first she thought them more Hyrkanians and then saw otherwise. They were tall and strongly built, chain mail glinting under their cloaks, and spired steel caps on their heads. She made up her mind instantly. Throwing herself from her steed, she ran up to the rocks

142

and fell on her knees, crying: "Aid, in the name of Ishtar the merciful!"

A man emerged, at the sight of whom she cried out: "General Artaban!" She clasped his knees. "Save me from those wolves that follow!"

"Why should I risk my life for you?" he asked indifferently.

"I knew you at the court of the king at Aghrapurl I danced before you. I am Roxana, the Zamorian,"

"Many women have danced before me."

"Then I will give you a password," said she in desperation. "Listen!"

As she whispered a name in his ear, he started as if stung. He stared piercingly at her. Then, clambering upon a great boulder, he faced the oncoming riders with lifted hand.

"Go your way in peace, in the name of King Yildiz of Turan!"

His answer was a whistle of arrows about his ears. He sprang down and waved. Bows twanged all along the barrier and arrows sheeted out among the Hyrkanians. Men rolled from their saddles; horses screamed and bucked. The other riders fell back, yelling in dismay. They wheeled and raced back down the valley. "

Artaban turned to Roxana: a tall man in a cloak of crimson silk and a chain-mail corselet threaded with gold. Water and blood had stained his apparel, yet its richness was still notable. His men gathered about him, forty stalwart Turanian mariners, bristling with weapons. A miserable-looking Yuetshi stood by with his hands bound.

"My daughter," said Artaban, "I have made enemies in this remote land on your behalf because of a name whispered in my ear. I believed you—"

"If I lied, may my skin be stripped from me."

"It will be," he promised gently. "I will see to it personally. You named Prince Teyaspa. What do you know of him?"

143

"For three years I have shared his exile."

"Where is he?"

She pointed down the valley to where the turrets of the castle were just visible among the crags. "In yonder strong-hold of Gleg the Zaporoskan."

"It would be hard to take," mused Artaban.

"Send for the rest of your sea hawks! I know a way to bring you to the heart of that keep!"

He shook his head. "These you see are all my band. Seeing her incredulity he added: "I am not surprised that you wonder. I will tell you ..."

With the frankness that his fellow-Turamans found so disconcerting, Artaban sketched his fall. He did not tell her of his triumphs, which were too well-known to need repetition. He was famous as a general for his swift raids into far countries-Brythunia, Zamora, Koth, and Shem -when five years before, the pirates of the Sea of Vilayet, working in league with the outlaw *kozaki* of the adjoining steppes, had become a formidable menace to that westernmost Hyrkanian kingdom, and King Yildiz had called upon Artaban to redress the situation. By vigorous action Artaban had put down the pirates, or at least driven them away from the western shores of the sea.

But Artaban, a passionate gambler, had gotten deeply in debt. To discharge his debts he had, while on a lone patrol with his flagship, seized a legitimate merchantman out of Khorusun, put all her people to the sword, and taken her cargo back to his base to sell secretly. But, though his crew was sworn to secrecy, somebody blabbed. Artaban had kept his head only at the price of a command from King Yildiz that almost amounted to suicide: to sail across the Sea of Vilayet to the mouth of the Zapo-roska River and destroy the encampments of the pirates. Only two ships happened to be available for this enterprise

Artaban had found the fortified camp of the Vilayet pirates and had taken it by storm, because only a few of

144

the pirates were in it at the time. The rest had gone up the river to fight a band of wandering Hyrkanians, similar to Kurush Khan's band, that had attacked the native Zaporoskans along the river, with whom the pirates were on friendly terms. Artaban destroyed several pirate ships in their docks and captured a number of old or sick pirates.

To cow the absent pirates, Artaban had ordered that those taken alive should be impaled, burned by slow fires, and flayed alive all at once. This sentence was in the midst of being executed when the main body of the pirates had returned. Artaban had fled, leaving one of his ships in their hands. Knowing the penalty for failure, he had struck out for the wild stretch along the southwestern shore of Vilayet Sea where the Colchian Mountains came down to the water. He was soon pursued by the pirates in the captured ship and overtaken when the western shore was already in sight. The resulting battle had raged over the decks of both ships until dead and wounded lay everywhere. The greater numbers and superior equipment of the Turanians, together with Artaban's adroit use of his ram, had barely given them a defensive, indecisive victory.

"So we ran the galley ashore in the creek. We might have repaired it, but the king's fleet rules all of Vilayet Sea, and he will have a bowstring ready for me when he knows I've failed. We struck into the mountains, seeking we know not what—a way out of Turanian dominions or a new kingdom to rule."

Roxana listened and then without comment began her tale. As Artaban well knew, it was the custom of the kings of Turan, upon coming to the throne, to kill their brothers and their brothers' children in order to eliminate the chance of a civil war. Moreover it was the custom, when the king died, for the nobles and generals to acclaim as king the first of his sons to reach the capital after the event

145

Even with this advantage, the weak Yildiz could not have conquered his aggressive brother Teyaspa had it not been for his mother, a Kothian woman named Khushia. This formidable old dame, the real ruler of Turan, preferred Yildiz because he was more docile, and Teyaspa was driven into exile. He sought refuge in Iranistan but discovered that the king of that land was corresponding with Yildiz in regard to poisoning him. In an attempt to reach Vendhya, he was captured by a nomadic Hyrkanian tribe, who recognized him and sold him to the Turanians. Teyaspa thought his fate was sealed, but his mother intervened and stopped Yildiz from having his brother strangled.

Instead, Teyaspa was confined in the castle of Gleg the Zaporoskan, a fierce semibandit chief who had come into the valley of the Akrim many years before and set himself up as a feudal lord over the primitive Yuetshi, preying on them but not protecting them. Teyaspa was furnished with all luxuries and forms of dissipation calculated to soften his fiber.

Roxana explained that she was one of the dancing girls sent to entertain him. She had fallen violently in love with the handsome prince and, instead of seeking to ruin him, had striven to lift him back to manhood.

"But," she concluded, "Prince Teyaspa has sunk into apathy. One would not know him for the young eagle who led his horsemen into the teeth of the Brythunian knights and the Shemitic *asshuri*. Imprisonment and wine and the juice of the black lotus have drugged his senses. He sits entranced on his cushions, rousing only when I sing or dance for him. But he has the blood of conquerors in him. He is a lion who but sleeps.

"When the Hyrkanians rode into the valley, I slipped out of the castle and went looking for Kurush Khan, in hope of finding a man bold enough to aid Teyaspa. But I saw Kurush Khan slain, and then the Hyrkanians be-came like mad dogs. I hid from them, but they dragged

146

me out. O my lord, help us! What if you have but a hand-ful? Kingdoms have been built on less! When it is known that the prince is free, men will flock to us! Yildiz is a fumbling mediocrity, and the people fear his son Yezdi-gerd, a fierce, cruel, and gloomy youth.

"The nearest Turanian garrison is three days' ride from here. Akrim is isolated, known to few but wandering no-mads and the wretched Yuetschi. Here an empire can be plotted unmolested. You too are an outlaw; let us band together to free Teyaspa and place him on his throne! If he were king, all wealth and honor were yours, while . Yildiz offers you naught but a bowstring!"

She was on her knees, gripping his cloak, her dark eyes ablaze with passion. Artaban stood silently, then sud-denly laughed a gusty laugh.

"We shall need the Hyrkanians," he said, and the girl clapped her hands with a cry of joy.

"Hold up!" Conan the Cimmerian halted and glanced about, craning his massive neck. Behind him, his comrades shifted with a clank of weapons. They were in a narrow canyon, flanked on either hand by steep slopes grown with stunted firs. Before them, a small spring welled up among straggling trees and trickled away down a moss-green channel.

"Water here at least," grunted Conan. "Drink." The previous evening, a quick march had brought them to Artaban's ship in its hiding place in the creek before dark. Conan had left four of his most seriously wounded men here, to work at patching up the vessel, while he pushed on with the rest. Believing that the Turanians were only a short distance ahead, Conan had pressed reck-lessly on in hope of coming up with them and avenging the massacre on the Zaporoska. But then, with the setting of the young moon, they had lost the trail in a maze of gullies and wandered blindly. Now at dawn they had found water but were lost and worn cut The only sign

147

of human life they had seen since leaving the coast was a huddle of huts among the crags, housing nondescript skin-clad creatures who fled howling at their approach. Some-where in the hills a lion roared.

Of the twenty-six, Conan was the only one whose mus-cles retained their spring. "Get some sleep," he growled. "Ivanos, pick two men to take the first watch with you. When the sun's over that fir, wake three others. I'm going to scout up this gorge."

He strode up the canyon and was soon lost among the straggling growth. The slopes changed to towering cliffs that rose sheer from the sloping, rock-littered floor. Then, with heart-stopping suddenness, a wild, shaggy figure sprang up from a tangle of bushes and confronted the pirate. Conan's breath hissed through his teeth as his sword flashed. Then he checked the stroke, seeing that the apparition was weaponless.

It was a Yuetschi: a wizened, gnomelike man in sheep-skins, with long arms, short legs, and a flat, yellow, slant-eyed face seamed with many small wrinkles.

"Khosatral!" exclaimed the vagabond. "What does one of the Free Brotherhood in this Hyrkanian-haunted land?" The man spoke the Turanian dialect of Hyrka-nian, but with a strong accent.

"Who are you?" grunted Conan.

"I was a chief of the Yuetschi," answered the other with a wild laugh. "I was called Vinashko. What do you here?"

"What lies beyond this canyon?" Conan countered.

"Over yonder ridge lies a tangle of gullies and crags. If you thread your way among them, you will come out over-looking the broad valley of the Akrim, which until yes-terday was the home of my tribe, and which today holds their charred bones,"

"Is there food there?"

"Aye—and death. A horde of Hyrkanian nomads holds the valley."

148

As Conan ruminated this, a step brought him about, to see Ivanos approaching.

"Hah!" Conan scowled. "I told you to watch while the men slept!"

"They are too hungry to sleep," retorted the Corin-thian, suspiciously eyeing the Yuetschi.

"Crom!" growled the Cimmerian. "I cannot conjure food out of the air. They must gnaw their thumbs until we find a village to loot—"

"I can lead you to enough food to feed an army," inter-rupted Vinashko.

Conan said, his voice heavy with menace: "Don't mock me, my friend! You just said the Hyrkanians—"

"Nay! There's a place near here, unknown to them, where we stored food. I was going thither when I saw you."

Conan hefted his sword, a broad, straight, double-edged blade over four feet long, in a land where curved blades

were more the rule. "Then lead on, Yuetshi, but at the first false move, off goes your head!"

Again the Yuetshi laughed that wild, scornful laugh, and motioned them to follow. He made for the nearer cliff, groped among the brittle bushes, and disclosed a crack in the wall. Beckoning, he bent and crawled inside.

"Into that wolf's den?" said Ivanos. "What are you afraid of?" said Conan, "Mice?"

He bent and squeezed through the opening, and the other followed him. Conan found himself, not in a cave, but in a narrow cleft of the cliff. Overhead a narrow, crooked ribbon of blue morning sky appeared between the steep walls, which got higher with every step. They advanced through the gloom for a hundred paces and came out into a wide circular space surrounded by tower-ing walls of what looked at first glance like a monstrous honeycomb. A low roaring came from the center of the space, where a small circular curbing surrounded a hole

149

in the floor, from which issued a pallid flame as tall as a man, casting a wan illumination about the cavity.

Conan looked curiously about him. It was like being at the bottom of a gigantic well. The floor was of solid rock, worn smooth as if by the feet of ten thousand genera-tions. The walls, too regularly circular to be altogether natural, were pierced by hundreds of black square depres-sions a hand's breadth deep and arranged in regular rows and tiers. The wall rose stupendously, ending in a small circle of blue sky, where a vulture hung like a dot. A spiral stairway cut in the black rock started up from ground level, made half a complete circle as it rose, and ended with a platform in front of a larger black hole in the wall, the entrance to a tunnel.

Vinashko explained: "Those holes are the tombs of an ancient people who lived here even before my ancestors came to the Sea of Vilayet There are a few dim legends about these people; it is said they were not human, but preyed upon my ancestors until a priest of the Yuetshi by a great spell confined them to their holes in the wall and lit that fire to hold them there. No doubt their bones have all long since crumbled to dust. A few of my people have tried to chip away the slabs of stone that block these tombs, but the rock defied their efforts." He pointed to heaps of stuff at one side of the amphitheater. "My peo-ple stored food here against times of famine. Take your fill; there are no more Yuetshi to eat it"

Conan repressed a shudder of superstitious fear. "Your people should have dwelt in these caves. One man could hold that outer cleft against a horde."

The Yuetshi shrugged. "Here there is no water. Be-sides, when the Hyrkanians swooped down there was no time. My people were not warlike; they only wished to till the soil."

Conan shook his head, unable to understand such na-tures. Vinashko was pulling out leather bags of grain,

150

rice, moldy cheese, and dried meat, and skins of sour wine,

"Go bring some of the men to help carry the stuff, Ivanos," said Conan, staring upward. "I'll stay here."

As Ivanos swaggered off, Vinashko tugged at Conan's arm. "Now do you believe I'm honest?"

"Aye, by Crom," answered Conan gnawing a handful of dried figs. "Any man that leads me to food must be a friend. But how did you and your tribe get here from the valley of the Akrim? It m"«t be a long steep road."

Vinashko's eyes gleamed like those of a hungry wolf. "That is our secret. I will show you, if you trust me."

"When my belly's full," said Conan with his mouth full of figs. "We're following that black devil, Artaban of Shahpur, who is somewhere in these mountains."

"He is your enemy?"

"Enemy! If I catch him, I'll make a pair of boots of his hide."

"Artaban of Shahpur is but three hours' ride from here."

"Ha!" Conan started up, feeling for his sword, his blue eyes ablaze. "Lead me to him!"

"Take care!" cried Vinashko. "He has forty armored Turanians and has been joined by Dayuki and a hundred and fifty Hyrkanians. How many warriors have you, lord?"

Conan munched silently, scowling. With such a dis-parity of numbers, he could not afford to give Artaban any advantages. In the months since he had become a pirate captain, he had beaten and bullied his crew into an effective force, but it was still an instrument that had to be used with care. By themselves they were reckless and improvident; well led, they could do much, but without wise leadership they would throw away their lives on a whim.

Vinashko said: "If you will come with me, *kozak*, I will show you what no man save a Yuetshi has seen for a thousand years!"

151

"What's that?"

"A road of death for our enemies!"

Conan took a step, then halted. "Wait; here come the red brothers. Hear the dogs swear!"

"Send them back with the food," whispered Vinashko as half a dozen pirates swaggered out of the cleft to gape at the cavern. Conan faced them with a grand gesture.

"Lug this stuff back to the spring," he said. "I told you I should find food."

"And what of you?" demanded Ivanos.

"Don't fret about me! I have words with Vinashko. Go back to camp and gorge yourselves, may the fiends bite you!"

As the pirates' footsteps faded away down the cleft, Conan gave Vinashko a clap on the back that staggered him. "Let's go," he said.

The Yuetshi led the way up the circular stairway carved in the rock wall. Above the last tier of tombs, it ended at

the tunnel's mouth. Conan found that he could stand upright in the tunnel.

"If you follow this tunnel," said Vinashko, "you will come out behind the castle of the Zaporoskan, Gleg, that overlooks Akrim."

"What good will that do?" grunted Conan, feeling his way behind the Yuetshi.

"Yesterday when the slaying began, I strove for a while against the Hyrkanian dogs. When my comrades had all been cut down I fled the valley, running up to the Gorge of Diva. I had run into the gorge when I found myself among strange warriors, who knocked me down and bound me, wishing to ask me what went on in the valley. They were sailors of the king's Vilayet squadron and called their leader Artaban.

"While they questioned me, a girl came riding like mad with the Hyrkanians after her. When she sprang from her horse and begged aid of Artaban, I recognized her as the Zamorian dancing girl who dwells in Gleg's castle. A vol-

152

ley of arrows scattered the Hyrkanians, and then Artaban talked with the girl, forgetting about me. For three years Gleg has held a captive. I know, because I have taken grain and sheep to the castle, to be paid in the Zaporoskan fashion, with curses and blows. *Kozak*, the prisoner is Teyaspa, brother of King Yildiz!"

Conan grunted in surprise.

"The girl, Roxana, disclosed this to Artaban, and he swore to aid her in freeing the prince. As they talked, the Hyrkanians returned and halted at a distance, vengeful but cautious. Artaban hailed them and had speech with Dayuki, the new chief since Kurush Khan was slain. At last the Hyrkanian came over the wall of rocks and shared bread and salt with Artaban. And the three plotted to rescue Prince Teyaspa and put him on the throne.

"Roxana had discovered the secret way to the castle. Today, just before sunset, the Hyrkanians are to attack the castle from the front. While they thus attract the attention of the Zaporoskans, Artaban and his men are to come to the castle by a secret way. Roxana will open the door for them, and they will take the prince and flee into the hills, to recruit warriors. As they talked, night fell, and I gnawed through my cords and slipped away.

"You wish vengeance. I'll show you how to trap Artabatt. Slay the lot—all but Teyaspa. You can either extort a mighty price from Khushia for her son, or from Yildiz for killing him, or if you prefer you can try to be king-maker yourself."

"Show me," said Conan, eyes agleam with eagerness.

The smooth floor of the tunnel, in which three horses might have been ridden abreast, slanted downward. From time to time short flights of steps gave on to lower levels. For a while Conan could not see anything in the darkness. Then a faint glow ahead relieved it. The glow became a silvery sheen, and the sound of falling water filled the tunnel.

They stood in the mouth of the tunnel, which was 153

masked by a sheet of water rushing over the cliff above. From the pool that foamed at the foot of the falls, a narrow stream raced away down the gorge. Vinashko pointed out a ledge that ran from the cavern mouth, skirting the pool. Conan followed him. Plunging through the thin edge of the falls, he found himself in a gorge like a knife cut through the hills. Nowhere was it more than fifty paces wide, with sheer cliffs on both sides. No vegetation grew anywhere except for a fringe along the stream. The stream meandered down the canyon floor to plunge through a narrow crack in the opposite cliff.

Conan followed Vinashko up the twisting gorge. Within three hundred paces, they lost sight of the water-fall. The floor slanted upward. Shortly the Yuetshi drew back, clutching his companion's arm. A stunted tree grew at an angle in the rock wall, and behind this Vinashko crouched, pointing.

Beyond the angle, the gorge ran on for eighty paces and ended in an impasse. On their left the cliff seemed curiously altered, and Conan stared for an instant before he realized that he was looking at a man-made wall. They were almost behind a castle built in a notch in the cliffs. Its wall rose sheer from the edge of a deep crevice. No bridge spanned this chasm, and the only apparent entrance in the wall was a heavy, iron-braced door halfway up the wall. Opposite to it, a narrow ledge ran along the opposite side of the gorge, and this had been improved so that it could be reached on foot from where they stood.

"By this path the girl Roxana escaped," said Vinashko. "This gorge runs almost parallel to the Akrim. It narrows to the west and finally comes into the valley through a narrow notch, where the stream flows through. The Zaporoskans have blocked the entrance with stones so that the path cannot be seen from the outer valley unless one knows of it. They seldom use this road and know nothing of the tunnel behind the waterfall."

154

Conan rubbed his shaven chin. He yearned to loot the castle himself but saw no way to come to it. "By Crom, Vinashko, I should like to look on this noted valley."

The Yuetshi glanced at Conan's bulk and shook his head. "There is a way we call the Eagle's Road, but it is not for such as you."

"Ymir! Is a skin-clad savage a better climber than a Cimmerian hillman? Lead on!"

Vinashko shrugged and led the way back down the gorge until, within sight of the waterfall, he stopped at what looked like a shallow groove corroded in the higher cliff-wall. Looking closely, Conan saw a series of shallow handholds notched into the solid rock.

"I'd have deepened these pockmarks," grumbled Conan, but started up nevertheless after Vinashko, clinging to the

shallow pits by toes and fingers. At last they reached the top of the ridge forming the southern side of the gorge and sat down with their feet hanging over the edge.

The gorge twisted like a snake's track beneath them. Conan looked out over the opposite and lower wall of the gorge into the valley of the Akrim.

On his right, the morning sun stood high over the glittering Sea of Vilayet; on his left rose the white-hooded peaks of the Colchians. Behind him he could see down into the tangle of gorges among which he knew his crew to be encamped.

Smoke still floated lazily up from the blackened patches that had been villages. Down the valley, on the left bank of the river, were pitched a number of tents of hide. Conan saw men swarming like ants around these tents. These were the Hyrkanians, Vinashko said, and pointed up the valley to the mouth of a narrow canyon where the Turanians were encamped. But the castle drew Conan's interest.

It was solidly set in a notch in the cliffs between the gorge beneath them and the valley beyond. The castle

15

faced the valley, entirely surrounded by a massive twenty-foot wall. A ponderous gate flanked by towers pierced with slits for arrows commanded the outer slope. This slope was not too steep to be climbed or even ridden up, but afforded no cover.

"It would take a devil to storm that castle," growled Conan. "How are we to come at the king's brother in that pile of rock? Lead us to Artaban, so I can take his head back to the Zaporoska."

"Be wary if you wish to wear your own," answered Vinashko. "What do you see in the gorge?"

"A lot of bare stone with a fringe of green along the stream."

The Yuetshi grinned wolflike. "And do you notice that the fringe is denser on the right bank, where it is also higher? Listen! From behind the waterfall we can watch until the Turanians come up the gorge. Then, while they are busy at Cleg's castle, we'll hide among the bushes along the stream and waylay them as they return. We'll kill all but Teyaspa, whom we will take captive. Then we'll go back through the tunnel. Have you a ship to escape in?"

"Aye," said Conan, rising and stretching. "Vinashko, is there any way down from this knife edge you have us balanced on except that shaft we came up by?"

"There is a trail that leads east along the ridge and then down into those gullies where your men camp. Let me show you. Do you see that rock that looks like an old woman? Well, you turn right there . . ."

Conan listened attentively to the directions, but the substance of them was that this perilous path, more suitable for ibex or chamois than for men, did not provide access to the gorge beneath them.

In the midst of his explanation, Vinashko turned and stiffened. "What's this?" he said.

Men were galloping out of the distant Hyrkanian camp and lashing their horses across the shallow river.

156

The sun struck glints from lance points. On the castle walls helmets began to sparkle.

"The attack!" cried Vinashko. "Khosatral Khel! They've changed their plans; they were not going to attack until evening! Quickly! We must get down before the Turanians arrive!"

They levered their bodies into the shallow groove and crept down, step by step.

At last they stood in the gorge and hastened toward the waterfall. They reached the pool, crossed the ledge, and plunged through the fall. As they came into the dimness beyond, Vinashko gripped Conan's mailed arm. Above the rush of water the Cimmerian heard the clink of steel on rock. He looked out through the silver-shimmering screen that made everything ghostly and unreal, but which hid them from the eyes of anyone outside. They had not gained their refuge any too soon. A band of men was coming along the gorge—tall men in mail hauberks and turban-bound helmets. At their head strode one taller than the rest, with black-bearded, hawklike features. Conan sighed and gripped his sword hilt, moving forward a trifle, but Vinashko caught him.

"In the gods' names, *kozak*," he whispered frantically "don't throw away our lives! We have them trapped, but if you rush out now—"

"Don't worry, little man," said Conan with a somber grin. "I am not so simple as to spoil a good vengeance by a thoughtless impulse."

The Turanians were crossing the narrow stream. On the farther bank they halted in an attitude of listening. Presently, above the rush of the waters, the men in the cave-mouth heard the distant shouting of many men.

"The attack!" whispered Vinashko.

As if it were a signal, the Turanians started swiftly up the gorge. Vinashko touched the Cimmerian's arm.

"Bide here and watch. I'll hasten back and bring your pirates."

157

"Hurry, then," said Conan, "It will be touch and go if you can get them here in time." And Vinashko slipped away like a shadow.

In a broad chamber luxuriant with gold-worlced tapestries, silken divans, and velvet cushions, the prince Te-yaspa reclined. He seemed the picture of voluptuous idleness as he lounged in silks and satins, a crystal jar of wine at his elbow. His dark eyes were those of a dreamer whose dreams are tinted with wine and drugs. His gaze rested on Roxana, who tensely gripped the bars of a casement, peering out, but his expression was placid and far-away. He seemed unaware of the yells and clamor that raged without.

Roxana moved restlessly, glancing at the prince over her slim shoulder. She had fought like a tigress to keep Te-yaspa from falling into the gulf of degeneracy and resignation that his captors had prepared. Roxana, no fatalist,

had stung him into life and ambition.

"It is time," she breathed, turning. "The sun hangs at the zenith. The Hyrkanians ride up the slope, lashing their steeds and loosing their arrows vainly against the walls. The Zaporoskans pour arrows and stones down upon them, until bodies litter the slope, but they come on again like madmen. I must hasten. You shall yet sit on the golden throne, my lover!"

She prostrated herself and kissed his slippers in an ecstasy of adoration, then rose and hurried out of the room, through another where ten great black mutes kept guard night and day. She traversed a corridor to the outer court that lay between the castle and the, postern wall. Though Teyaspa was not allowed unguarded out of his chamber, she was free to come and go as she liked.

Crossing the court, she approached the door that led into the gorge. One warrior leaned there, disgruntled because he could not take part in the fighting. Though the rear of the castle seemed invulnerable, the cautious Gleg

158

had posted a sentry there anyway. The man on guard was a Sogdian, his felt cap perched on the side of his head. He leaned, on a pike, scowling, as Roxana approached him. "What do you here, woman?"

"I am afraid. The cries and shouts frighten me, lord. The prince is drugged with lotus juice, and there is none to soothe my fears."

She would have fired the heart of a corpse as she stood in an attitude of fear and supplication. The Sogdian plucked his thick beard.

"Nay, fear not, little gazelle," he said. "I'll soothe you." He laid a black-nailed hand on her shoulder and drew her close. "None shall touch a lock of your hair. I—ahhh!"

Snuggling in his arms, Roxana had slipped a dagger from her sash and thrust it through his thick throat. One of the Sogdian's hands clutched at his beard while the other fumbled for the hilt in his girdle. He reeled and fell heavily. Roxana snatched a bunch of keys from his girdle and ran to the door. She swung it open and gave a low cry of joy at the sight of Artaban and his Turanians on the ledge across the chasm.

A heavy plank, used as a bridge, lay inside the gate, but it was far too heavy for her to handle. Chance had enabled her to use it for her previous escape, when rare carelessness had left it in place across the chasm and un-guarded for a few minutes. Artaban tossed her the end of a rope, which she made fast to the hinges of the door. The other end was gripped by half a dozen strong men, and three Turanians crossed the crevice, swinging hand over hand. They spanned the chasm with the plank for the rest to cross.

"Twenty men guard the bridge," snapped Artaban. "The rest follow me."

The sea wolves drew their steel and followed their chief. Artaban led them swiftly after the light-footed girl. As they entered the castle, a servitor sprang up and gaped at them. Before he could cry out, Dayuki's razor-edged

159

yataghan sliced through his throat, and the band rushed into the chamber where the ten mutes sprang up, grip-ping scimitars. There was a flurry of fierce, silent right-ing, noiseless except for the hiss and rasp of steel and the gasps of the wounded. Three Turanians died, and the rest strode into the inner chamber over the mangled bodies of the blacks.

Teyaspa rose, his quiet eyes gleaming with old fire, as Artaban dramatically knelt before him and lifted the hilt of his bloody scimitar.

"These are the warriors who shall set you on your throne!" cried Roxana.

"Let us go quickly, before the Zaporoskan dogs are aware of us," said Artaban.

He drew up his men in a clump around Teyaspa. Swiftly they traversed the chambers, crossed the court, and approached the gate. But the clang of steel had been heard. Even as the raiders were crossing the bridge, savage yells rose behind them. Across the courtyard rushed a stocky, powerful figure in silk and steel, followed by fifty helmeted archers and swordsmen, "Gleg!" screamed Roxana.

"Cast down the plank!" roared Artaban, springing to the bridgehead.

On each side of the chasm bows twanged until the air over the plank was clouded with shafts whistling in both directions. Several Zaporoskans fell, but so did the two Turanians who stooped to lift the plank, and across the bridge rushed Gleg, his cold gray eyes blazing under his spired helmet. Artaban met him breast to breast. In a glittering whirl of steel the Turanian's scimitar grated around Gleg's blade, and the keen edge cut through the camail and the thick muscles of the Zaporoskan's neck. Gleg staggered and, with a wild cry, pitched off into the chasm.

In an instant the Turanians had cast the bridge after him. On the far side, the Zaporoskans halted with furious

160

yells and began shooting their thick horn bows as fast as they could draw and nock. Before the Turanians, running down the ledge, could get out of range, three more had been brought down and a couple of others had received minor wounds from the vicious arrow storm. Artaban cursed at his losses.

"All but six of you go forward to see that the way is clear," he ordered. "I follow with the prince. My lord, I could not bring a horse up this defile, but I will have the dogs make you a litter of spears—"

"The gods forbid that I ride on my deliverers' shoulders!" cried Teyaspa. "Again I am a man! I shall never forget

this day!"

"The gods be praised!" whispered Roxana.

They came within sight of the waterfall. All but the small group in the rear had crossed the stream and were straggling down the left bank, when there came a multi-ple snap of bowstrings, as though a hand had swept across the strings of a muted harp. A sheet of arrows hissed across the stream into their ranks, and then another and another. The foremost Turanians went down like wheat under the scythe and the rest gave back, shouting alarm.

"Dog!" shouted Artaban, turning on Dayuki. "This is your work."

"Do I order my men to shoot at me?" squalled the Hyrkanian, his dark face pale. "This is some new enemy!"

Artaban ran down the gorge toward his demoralized men, cursing. He knew that the Zaporoskans would rig up some sort of bridge across the chasm and pursue him, catching him between two forces. Who his assailants were he had no idea. From the castle he heard the shouts of battle, and then a great rumble of hooves and shouting and clang of steel seemed to come from the outer valley. But, pent in that narrow gorge, which muffled sound, he could not be sure.

The Turanians continued to fall before the storm of arrows from their invisible opponents. Some loosed

161

blindly into the bushes. Artaban knocked their bows aside, shouting:

"Fools!" Why waste arrows on shadows? Draw steel and follow me!"

With a fury of desperation, the remaining Turanians charged the ambush, cloaks flowing and eyes blazing. Arrows brought down some, but the rest leaped into the water and splashed across. From the bushes on the farther bank rose wild figures, mail-clad or half-naked, swords in hands. "Up and at them!" bellowed a great voice. "Cut and thrust!"

A yell of amazement rose from the Turanians at the sight of the Vilayet pirates. Then they closed with a roar. The rasp and clangor of steel echoed from the cliffs. The first Turanians to spring up the higher bank fell back into the stream with heads split. Then the pirates leaped down the bank to meet their foes hand-to-hand, thigh-deep in water that soon swirled crimson. Pirate and Turanian slashed and slew in a blind frenzy, sweat and blood running into their eyes.

Dayuki ran into the melee, glaring. His double-curved blade split a pirate's head. Then Vinashko leaped upon him barehanded and screaming.

The Hyrkanian recoiled from the mad ferocity in the Yuetsi's features, but Vinashko caught Dayuki around the neck and sank his teeth in the man's throat. He hung on, chewing deeper and deeper, heedless of the dagger that Dayuki drove again and again into his side. Blood spurted around his jaws until both lost their footing and fell into the stream. Still tearing and rending, they were washed down with the current, now one face showing above water, now another, until both vanished forever.

The Turanians were driven back up the left bank, where they made a brief, bloody stand. Then they broke and fled toward the place where Prince Teyaspa stared entranced in the shadow of the cliff, with the small knot of warriors whom Artaban had detailed to guard him.

162

Thrice he moved as though to draw his sword and cast himself into the fray, but Roxana, clinging to his knees, stopped him.

Artaban, breaking away from the battle, hastened to Teyaspa. The admiral's sword was red to the hilt, his mail was hacked, and blood dripped from beneath his helmet. After him through the melee came Conan, brandishing his great sword in his sledgelike fist. He beat down his foes with strokes that shattered bucklers, caved in helmets, and clove through mail, flesh, and bone.

"Ho, you rascals!" he roared in his barbarous Hyrkanian. "I want your head, Artaban, and the fellow beside you there—Teyaspa, Fear not, my pretty prince; I'll not hurt you."

Artaban, looking about for an avenue of escape, saw the groove leading up the cliff and divined its purpose.

"Quick, my lord!" he whispered. "Up the cliff! I'll hold off the barbarian while you climb!"

"Aye, hasten!" urged Roxana. "I'll follow!"

But the fatalistic mask had descended again on Prince Teyaspa. He shrugged. "Nay, the gods do not will that I should press the throne. Who can escape his destiny?"

Roxana clutched her hair with a look of horror. Artaban sheathed his sword, sprang for the groove, and started up with the agility of a sailor. But Conan, coming up behind him at a run, reached up, caught his ankle, and plucked him out of his cranny like a fowler catching a bird by the leg. Artaban struck the ground with a clang. As he tried to roll over to wrench loose, the Cimmerian drove his sword into the Turanian's body, crunching through mail links, and into the ground beneath.

Pirates approached with dripping blades. Teyaspa spread his hands, saying: "Take me if you will. I am Teyaspa."

Roxana swayed, her hands over her eyes. Then like a flash she thrust her dagger through Teyaspa's heart, and he died on his feet. As he fell, she drove the point into her

163

own breast and sank down beside her lover. Moaning, she cradled his head in her arms, while the pirates stood about, awed and incomprehending.

A sound up the gorge made them lift their heads. They were but a handful, weary and dazed with battle, their garments soaked with blood and water.

Conan said: "Men are coming down the gorge. Get back into the tunnel."

They obeyed, but slowly, as if they only half understood him. Before the last of them had ducked under the waterfall, a stream of men poured down the path from the castle. Conan, cursing and beating his rearmost men to make them hurry, looked around to see the gorge thronged with armed figures. He recognized the fur caps of the Zaporoskans and with them the white turbans of the Imperial Guards from Aghrapur. One of these wore a spray of bird-of-paradise feathers in his turban, and Conan stared to recognize, from these and other indications, the general of the Imperial Guards, the third man of the Turanian Empire.

The general saw Conan and the tail of his procession too and shouted an order. As Conan, the last in line, plunged through the waterfall, a body of Turanians detached themselves from the rest and ran to the pool.

Conan yelled to his men to run, then turned and faced the sheet of water from the inner side, holding up a buckler from a dead Turanian and his great sword.

Presently a guardsman came through the sheet of water. He started to yell, but the sound was cut off by a meaty *chunk* as Conan's sword sheared through his neck. His head and body tumbled separately off the ledge into the pool. The second guard had time to strike at the dim figure that towered over him, but his sword rebounded from the Cimmerian's buckler. The next instant he in turn fell back into the pool with a cloven skull.

There were shouts, partly muffled by the sound of the water. Conan flattened himself against the side of the

164

tunnel, and a storm of arrows whipped through the sheet of water, bringing little splashes of droplets with them and rebounding with a clatter from the walls and floor of the tunnel.

A glance back showed Conan that his men had vanished into the gloom of the tunnel. He ran after them, so that when, a few moments later, the guardsmen again burst through the waterfall, they found nobody in front of them.

Meanwhile in the gorge, voices filled with horror rose as the newcomers halted among the corpses. The general knelt beside the dead prince and the dying girl.

"It is Prince Teyaspal" he cried.

"He is beyond your power," murmured Roxana. "I would have made him king, but you robbed him of his manhood ... so I killed him ..."

"But I bring him the crown of Turan!" cried the general. "Yildiz is dead, and the people will rise against his son Yezdigird if they have anyone else to follow—"

"Too late!" whispered Roxana, and her dark head sank on her arm.

Conan ran up the tunnel with the feet of the pursuing Turanians echoing after him. Where the tunnel opened into the great natural chimney lined with the tombs of the forgotten race, he saw his men grouped uncertainly on the floor of the pit below him, some looking at the hissing flame and some up at the stair down which they had come.

"Go on to the ship!" he bellowed through cupped hands. The words rattled back from the black cylindrical walls.

The men ran out into the cleft that led to the outer world. Conan turned again and leaned against the side of the chimney just alongside the tunnel entrance. He waited as the footsteps grew louder.

165

An Imperial Guard popped out of the tunnel. Again Conan's sword swished and struck, biting into the man's back through mail and skin and spine. With a shriek the guard pitched head-first off the platform. His momentum carried him out from the spiral stair toward the middle of the floor below. His body plunged into the hole in the rocky floor from which issued the flame and wedged there like a cork in a bottle. The flame went out with a pop, plunging the chamber into gloom only faintly relieved by the opening to the sky far above.

Conan did not see the body strike the floor, for he was watching the tunnel opening for his next foe. The next guard looked out but leaped back as Conan struck at him with a ferocious backhand. There came a jabber of voices; an arrow whizzed out of the tunnel past Conan's face, to strike the far side of the chamber and shatter against the black rock.

Conan turned and started down the stone steps, taking three at a time. As he reached the bottom, he saw Ivanos herding the last of the pirates into the cleft across the floor, perhaps ten strides away. To the left of the cleft, five times Conan's height from the floor, the Turanian guards boiled out of the tunnel and clattered down the stairs. A couple loosed arrows at the Cimmerian as they ran, but between the speed of his motion and the dimness of the light their shots missed.

But, as Conan reached the bottom steps, another group of beings appeared. With a grinding sound, the slabs of stone blocking the ends of the tomb cavities swung inward, first a few, then by scores. Like a swarm of larvae issuing from their cells, the inhabitants of the tombs came forth. Conan had not taken three strides toward the cleft when he found the way blocked by a dozen of the things.

They were of vaguely human form, but white and hair-less, lean and stringy as if from a long fast. Their toes and fingers ended in great, hooked claws. They had large, staring eyes set in faces that looked more like those of

166

bats than of human beings, with great, flaring ears, little snub noses, and wide mouths that opened to show needle-pointed fangs.

The first to reach the floor were those who crawled out of the bottom tiers of cells. But the upper tiers were opening too and the creatures were spelling out of them by hundreds, climbing swiftly down the pitted walls of the chamber by

their hooked claws. Those that reached the floor first glimpsed the last pirates as they entered the cleft. With a pointing of clawed fingers and a shrill twittering, those nearest the cleft rushed toward and into it.

Conan, the hairs of his neck prickling with a barbarian's horror of supernatural menaces, recognized the new-comers as the dreaded *brylukas* of Zaporoskan legend— creatures neither man nor beast nor demon, but a little of all three. Their near-human intelligence served their bestial lust for human blood, while their supernatural powers enabled them to survive even though entombed for centuries. Creatures of darkness, they had been held at bay by the light of the flame. When this was put out they emerged, as ferocious as ever and even more avid for blood.

Those that struck the floor near Conan rushed upon him, claws outstretched. With an inarticulate roar he whirled, making wide sweeps with his great sword to keep them from piling on his back. The blade sheared off a head here, an arm there, and cut one *bryluka* in half. Still they clustered, twittering, while from the spiral stair-case rose the shrieks of the leading Turanians as *brylukas* leaped upon them from above and climbed up from below to fasten their claws and fangs in their bodies.

The stair was clustered with writhing, battling figures as the Turanians hacked madly at the things crowding upon them. A cluster consisting of one guard with several *brylukas* clinging to him tolled off the stair to strike the floor. The entrance to the cleft was solidly jammed

167

with twittering *brylukas* trying to force their way in to chase Conan's pirates. In the seconds before they over-whelmed him too, Conan saw that neither way out would serve him. With a bellow of fury he ran across the floor, but not in the direction the *brylukas* expected. Weaving and zigzagging, his sword a whirling glimmer in the gloom, he reached the wall directly below the platform that formed the top of the stair and the entrance to the tunnel, leaving a trail of still or writhing figures behind him. Hooked claws snatched at him as he ran, glancing off his mail, tearing his clothes to ribbons, and drawing blood from deep scratches on his arms and legs.

As he reached the wall, Conan dropped his buckler, took his sword in his teeth, sprang high in the air, and caught the lower sill of one of the cells in the third tier above the floor, a cell that had already discharged its occupant. With simian agility the Cimmerian mountaineer went up the wall, using the cell openings as hand and foot-holds. Once, as his face came opposite a cell opening, a hideous batlike visage looked into his as the *bryluka* started to emerge. Conan's fist lashed out and struck the grinning face with a crunch of bone; then, without waiting to see what execution he had done, he swarmed on up.

Below him, other *brylukas* climbed the wall in pursuit. Then with a heave and a grunt he was on the platform. Those guards who had been behind the ones who first started down the stair, seeing what was happening in the chamber, had turned and raced back through the tunnel. A few *brylukas* crowded into the tunnel in pursuit just as Conan reached the platform.

Even as they turned toward him he was among them like a whirlwind. Bodies, whole or dismembered, spilled off the platform as his sword sheared through white, unnatural flesh. For an instant the platform was cleared of the gibbering horrors. Conan plunged into the tunnel and ran with all his might

168

Ahead of him ran a few of the vampires, and ahead of them the guards who had been coming along the tunnel. Conan, coming to the *brylukas* from behind, struck down one, then another, then another, until they were all writhing in their blood behind him. He kept on until he came to the end of the tunnel, where the last of the guards had just ducked through the waterfall.

A glance back showed Conan another swarm of *brylukas* rushing upon him with outstretched claws. Conan bolted through the sheet of water in his turn and found himself looking down upon the scene of the recent battle with the Turanians. The general and the rest of his escort were standing about, shouting and gesticulating as their fellows emerged from the water and ran down the ledge to the ground. When Conan appeared right after the last of these, the yammer continued without a break until a louder shout from the general cut through it:

"It is one of the pirates! Shoot!"

Conan, running down the ledge, was already halfway to the ladder shaft. Those in front of him, who had just reached the floor of the gorge, turned to stare as he raced past them with such tremendous strides that the archers, misjudging his speed, sent a flight of arrows clattering against the rocks behind him. Before they had nocked their second arrows, he had reached the vertical groove in the cliff face.

The Cimmerian slipped into the shaft, whose concavity protected him momentarily from the arrows of the Turanians standing near the general. He caught at the indentations with hands and toes and went up like a monkey. By the time the Turanians had recovered their wits enough to run up the gorge to a position in front of the groove, where they could see him to shoot at, Conan was fifteen paces up and rising fast

Another storm of arrows whistled about him, clattering as they glanced from the rock. A couple struck his body but were prevented from piercing his flesh by his mail

169

shirt. A couple of others struck his clothing and caught in the cloth. One hit his right arm, the point passing shallowly under the skin and then out again.

With a fearful oath Conan tore the arrow out of the wound point-first, threw it from him, and continued his climb. Blood from the flesh wound soaked up his arm and down his body. By the next volley, he was so high that the arrows had little force left when they reached him. One struck his boot but failed to penetrate.

Up and up he went, the Turanians becoming small beneath him. When their arrows no longer reached him, they ceased shooting. Snatches of argument floated up. The general wanted his men to climb the shaft after Conan, and

the men protested that this would be futile, as he would simply wait at the top of the cliff and cut their heads off one by one as they emerged. Conan smiled grimly.

Then he reached the top. He sat gasping on the edge with his feet hanging down into the shaft while he band-aged his wounds with strips torn from his clothing, meantime looking about him. Glancing ahead over the rock wall into the valley of the Akrim, he saw sheepskin-clad Hyrkanians riding hard for the hills, pursued by horsemen in glittering mail—Turanian soldiers. Below him, the Turanians and Zaporoskans milled around like ants and finally set off up the gorge to the castle, leaving a few of their number on watch in case Conan should come back down the groove.

Some time later Conan rose, stretched his great muscles, and turned to look eastward toward the Sea of Vi-layet. He started as his keen vision picked up a ship, and shading his eyes with his hand he made out a galley of the Turanian navy crawling away from the mouth of the creek where Artaban had left his ship.

"Crom!" he muttered. "So the cowards piled aboard and pulled out without waiting!"

He struck his palm with his fist, growling deep in his throat like an angry bear. Then he relaxed and laughed shortly. It was no more than he should have expected. Anyway, he was getting tired of the Hyrkanian lands, and there were still many countries in the West that he had never visited.

He started to hunt for the precarious route down from the ridge that Vinashko had shown him.