

Robert E. Howard

Wentworth Tales

THE HOUR OF THE DRAGON

*a vivid weird story of
a thousand scary thrills*

by ROBERT E. HOWARD



*The Hour
of the Dragon*

Printed by ...

Robert E. Howard

The Hour of the Dragon



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I

1. O Sleeper, Awake!

2. The Black Wind Blows

3. The Cliffs Reel

4. "From What Hell Have You Crawled?"

5. The Haunter of the Pits

PART II

The Story Thus Far

6. The Thrust of a Knife

7. The Rending of the Veil

8. Dying Embers

9. "It Is the King or His Ghost!"

10. A Coin from Acheron

PART III

The Story Thus Far

11. Swords of the South

12. The Fang of the Dragon

13. "A Ghost Out of the Past"

14. The Black Hand of Set

PART IV

The Story Thus Far

15. The Return of the Corsair

16. Black-Walled Khemi

17. "He Has Slain the Sacred Son of Set!"

18. "I Am The Woman Who Never Died"

19. In the Hall of the Dead

PART V.

The Story Thus Far

20. Out of the Dust Shall Acheron. Arise

21. Drums of Peril

22. The Road to Acheron

THE END

PART I

[Table of Contents](#)

The Hour of the Dragon

By **ROBERT E. HOWARD**



"A man—at least it looked like a man— wrapped in rags like a mummy."

1. O Sleeper, Awake!

Table of Contents

THE long tapers flickered, sending the black shadows wavering along the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carven jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees.

Inside the chamber was tense silence, and the wavering of the shadows, while four pairs of eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the long green case across which cryptic hieroglyphics writhed, as if lent life and movement by the unsteady light. The man at the foot of the sarcophagus leaned over it and moved his candle as if he were writing with a pen, inscribing a mystic symbol in the air. Then he set down the candle in its black gold stick at the foot of the case, and, mumbling some formula unintelligible to his companions, he thrust a broad white hand into his fur-trimmed robe. When he brought it forth again it was as if he cupped in his palm a ball of living fire.

The other three drew in their breath sharply, and the dark, powerful man who stood at the head of the sarcophagus whispered: "The Heart of Ahriman!" The other lifted a quick hand for silence. Somewhere a dog began howling dolefully, and a stealthy step padded outside the barred and bolted door. But none looked aside from the mummy-case over which the man in the ermine-trimmed

robe was now moving the great flaming jewel while he muttered an incantation that was old when Atlantis sank. The glare of the gem dazzled their eyes, so that they could not be sure of what they saw; but with a splintering crash, the carven lid of the sarcophagus burst outward as if from some irresistible pressure applied from within, and the four men, bending eagerly forward, saw the occupant—a huddled, withered, wizened shape, with dried brown limbs like dead wood showing through moldering bandages.

"Bring that thing back?" muttered the small dark man who stood on the right, with a short, sardonic laugh. "It is ready to crumble at a touch. We are fools—"

"Shhh!" It was an urgent hiss of command from the large man who held the jewel. Perspiration stood upon his broad white forehead and his eyes were dilated. He leaned forward, and, without touching the thing with his hand, laid on the breast of the mummy the blazing jewel. Then he drew back and watched with fierce intensity, his lips moving in soundless invocation.

It was as if a globe of living fire flickered and burned on the dead, withered bosom. And breath sucked in, hissing, through the clenched teeth of the watchers. For as they watched, an awful transmutation became apparent. The withered shape in the sarcophagus was expanding, was growing, lengthening. The bandages burst and fell into brown dust. The shiveled limbs swelled, straightened. Their dusky hue began to fade.

"By Mitra!" whispered the tall, yellow-haired man on the left. "He was not a Stygian. That part at least was true."

Again a trembling finger warned for silence. The hound outside was no longer howling. He whimpered, as with an evil dream, and then that sound, too, died away in silence, in which the yellow-haired man plainly heard the straining of the heavy door, as if something outside pushed powerfully upon it. He half turned, his hand at his sword, but the man in the ermine robe hissed an urgent warning: "Stay! Do not break the chain! And on your life do not go to the door!"

THE yellow-haired man shrugged and turned back, and then he stopped short, staring. In the jade sarcophagus lay a living man: a tall, lusty man, naked, white of skin, and dark of hair and beard. He lay motionless, his eyes wide open, and blank and unknowing as a newborn babe's. On his breast the great jewel smoldered and sparkled.

The man in ermine reeled as if from some let-down of extreme tension.

"Ishtar!" he gasped. "It is Xaltotun!—and he lives! Valerius! Tarascus! Amalric! Do you see? Do you see? You doubted me—but I have not failed! We have been close to the open gates of hell this night, and the shapes of darkness have gathered close about us—aye, they followed him to the very door—but we have brought the great magician back to life."

"And damned our souls to purgatories everlasting, I doubt not," muttered the small, dark man, Tarascus.

The yellow-haired man, Valerius, laughed harshly.

"What purgatory can be worse than life itself? So we are all damned together from birth. Besides, who would not sell his miserable soul for a throne?"

"There is no intelligence in his stare, Orastes," said the large man.

"He has long been dead," answered Orastes. "He is as one newly awakened. His mind is empty after the long sleep—nay, he was dead, not sleeping. We brought his spirit back over the voids and gulfs of night and oblivion. I will speak to him."

He bent over the foot of the sarcophagus, and fixing his gaze on the wide dark eyes of the man within, he said, slowly: "Awake, Xaltotun!"

The lips of the man moved mechanically. "Xaltotun!" he repeated in a groping whisper.

"You are Xaltotun!" exclaimed Orastes, like a hypnotist driving home his suggestions. "You are Xaltotun of Python, in Acheron."

A dim flame flickered in the dark eyes.

"I was Xaltotun," he whispered. "I am dead."

"You are Xaltotun!" cried Orastes. "You are not dead! You live!"

"I am Xaltotun," came the eery whisper. "But I am dead. In my house in Khemi, in Stygia, there I died."

"And the priests who poisoned you mummified your body with their dark arts, keeping all your organs intact!" exclaimed Orastes. "But now you live again! The Heart of Ahriman has restored your life, drawn your spirit back from space and eternity."

"The Heart of Ahriman!" The flame of remembrance grew stronger. "The barbarians stole it from me!"

"He remembers," muttered Orastes. "Lift him from the case."

The others obeyed hesitantly, as if reluctant to touch the man they had recreated, and they seemed not easier in their minds when they felt firm muscular flesh, vibrant with blood and life, beneath their fingers. But they lifted him upon the table, and Orastes clothed him in a curious dark velvet robe, splashed with gold stars and crescent moons, and fastened a cloth-of-gold fillet about his temples, confining the black wavy locks that fell to his shoulders. He let them do as they would, saying nothing, not even when they set him in a carved throne-like chair with a high ebony back and wide silver arms, and feet like golden claws. He sat there motionless, and slowly intelligence grew in his dark eyes and made them deep and strange and luminous. It was as if long-sunken witch-lights floated slowly up through midnight pools of darkness.

Orastes cast a furtive glance at his companions, who stood staring in morbid fascination at their strange guest. Their iron nerves had withstood an ordeal that might have driven weaker men mad. He knew it was with no weaklings that he conspired, but men whose courage was as profound as their lawless ambitions and capacity for evil. He turned his attention to the figure in the ebon-black chair. And this one spoke at last.

"I remember," he said in a strong, resonant voice, speaking Nemedian with a curious, archaic accent. "I am Xaltotun, who was high priest of Set in Python, which was in Acheron. The Heart of Ahriman—I dreamed I had found it again—where is it?"

Orastes placed it in his hand, and he drew breath deeply as he gazed into the depths of the terrible jewel burning in

his grasp.

"They stole it from me, long ago," he said. "The red heart of the night it is, strong to save or to damn. It came from afar, and from long ago. While I held it, none could stand before me. But it was stolen from me, and Acheron fell, and I fled an exile into dark Stygia. Much I remember, but much I have forgotten. I have been in a far land, across misty voids and gulfs and unlit oceans. What is the year?"

Orastes answered him. "It is the waning of the Year of the Lion, three thousand years after the fall of Acheron."

"Three thousand years!" murmured the other. "So long? Who are you?"

"I am Orastes, once a priest of Mitra. This man is Amalric, baron of Tor, in Nemedica; this other is Tarascus, younger brother of the king of Nemedica; and this tall man is Valerius, rightful heir of the throne of Aquilonia."

"Why have you given me life?" demanded Xaltotun. "What do you require of me?"

The man was now fully alive and awake, his keen eyes reflecting the working of an unclouded brain. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his manner. He came directly to the point, as one who knows that no man gives something for nothing. Orastes met him with equal candor.

"We have opened the doors of hell this night to free your soul and return it to your body because we need your aid. We wish to place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedica, and to win for Valerius the crown of Aquilonia. With your necromancy you can aid us."

Xaltotun's mind was devious and full of unexpected slants.

"You must be deep in the arts yourself, Orastes, to have been able to restore my life. How is it that a priest of Mitra knows of the Heart of Ahriman, and the incantations of Skelos?"

"I AM no longer a priest of Mitra," answered Orastes. "I was cast forth from my order because of my delving in black magic. But for Amalric there I might have been burned as a magician.

"But that left me free to pursue my studies. I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the ironbound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back life to your shriveled corpse. From moldering manuscripts I learned of the Heart of Ahriman. Then for a year I sought its hiding-place, and at last I found it."

"Then why trouble to bring me back to life?" demanded Xaltotun, with his piercing gaze fixed on the priests. "Why did you not employ the Heart to further your own power?"

"Because no man today knows the secrets of the Heart," answered Orastes. "Not even in legends live the arts by which to loose its full powers. I knew it could restore life; of its deeper secrets I am ignorant. I merely used it to bring you back to life. It is the use of your knowledge we seek. As for the Heart, you alone know its awful secrets."

Xaltotun shook his head, staring broodingly into the flaming depths.

"My necromantic knowledge is greater than the sum of all the knowledge of other men," he said; "yet I do not know the full power of the jewel. I did not invoke it in the old days; I guarded it lest it be used against me. At last it was stolen, and in the hands of a feathered shaman of the barbarians it defeated all my mighty sorcery. Then it vanished, and I was poisoned by the jealous priests of Stygia before I could learn where it was hidden."

"It was hidden in a cavern below the temple of Mitra, in Tarantia," said Orastes. "By devious ways I discovered this, after I had located your remains in Set's subterranean temple in Stygia.

"Zamorian thieves, partly protected by spells I learned from sources better left unmentioned, stole your mummy-case from under the very talons of those which guarded it in the dark, and by camel-caravan and galley and ox-wagon it came at last to this city.

"Those same thieves—or rather those of them who still lived after their frightful quest—stole the Heart of Ahriman from its haunted cavern below the temple of Mitra, and all the skill of men and the spells of sorcerers nearly failed. One man of them lived long enough to reach me and give the jewel into my hands, before he died slavering and gibbering of what he had seen in that accursed crypt. The thieves of Zamora are the most faithful of men to their trust. Even with my conjurements, none but them could have stolen the Heart from where it has lain in demon-guarded darkness since the fall of Acheron, three thousand years ago."

Xaltotun lifted his lion-like head and stared far off into space, as if plumbing the lost centuries.

"Three thousand years!" he muttered. "Set! Tell me what has chanced in the world."

"The barbarians who overthrew Acheron set up new kingdoms," quoted Orastes. "Where the empire had stretched now rose realms called Aquilonia, and Nemediā, and Argos, from the tribes that founded them. The older kingdoms of Ophir, Corinthia and western Koth, which had been subject to the kings of Acheron, regained their independence with the fall of the empire."

"And what of the people of Acheron?" demanded Orastes. "When I fled into Stygia, Python was in ruins, and all the great, purple-towered cities of Acheron fouled with blood and trampled by the sandals of the barbarians."

"In the hills small groups of folk still boast descent from Acheron," answered Orastes. "For the rest, the tide of my barbarian ancestors rolled over them and wiped them out. They—my ancestors—had suffered much from the kings of Acheron."

A grim and terrible smile curled the Pythonian's lips.

"Aye! Many a barbarian, both man and woman, died screaming on the altar under this hand. I have seen their heads piled to make a pyramid in the great square in Python when the kings returned from the west with their spoils and naked captives."

"Aye. And when the day of reckoning came, the sword was not spared. So Acheron ceased to be, and purple-towered Python became a memory of forgotten days. But the younger kingdoms rose on the imperial ruins and waxed

great. And now we have brought you back to aid us to rule these kingdoms, which, if less strange and wonderful than Acheron of old, are yet rich and powerful, well worth fighting for. Look!" Orastes unrolled before the stranger a map drawn cunningly on vellum.

XALTOTUN regarded it, and then shook his head, baffled.

"The very outlines of the land are changed. It is like some familiar thing seen in a dream, fantastically distorted."

"Howbeit," answered Orastes, tracing with his forefinger, "here is Belverus, the capital of Nemediia, in which we now are. Here run the boundaries of the land of Nemediia. To the south and southeast are Ophir and Corinthia, to the east Brythunia, to the west Aquilonia."

"It is the map of a world I do not know," said Xaltotun softly, but Orastes did not miss the lurid fire of hate that flickered in his dark eyes.

"It is a map you shall help us change," answered Orastes. "It is our desire first to set Tarascus on the throne of Nemediia. We wish to accomplish this without strife, and in such a way that no suspicion will rest on Tarascus. We do not wish the land to be torn by civil wars, but to reserve all our power for the conquest of Aquilonia.

"Should King Nimed and his sons die naturally, in a plague for instance, Tarascus would mount the throne as the next heir, peacefully and unopposed."

Xaltotun nodded, without replying, and Orastes continued.

"The other task will be more difficult. We cannot set Valerius on the Aquilonian throne without a war, and that

kingdom is a formidable foe. Its people are a hardy, war-like race, toughened by continual wars with the Picts, Zingarians and Cimmerians. For five hundred years Aquilonia and Nemedra have intermittently waged war, and the ultimate advantage has always lain with the Aquilonians.

"Their present king is the most renowned warrior among the western nations. He is an outlander, an adventurer who seized the crown by force during a time of civil strife, strangling King Nemedides with his own hands, upon the very throne. His name is Conan, and no man can stand before him in battle.

"Valerius is now the rightful heir of the throne. He had been driven into exile by his royal kinsman, Nemedides, and has been away from his native realm for years, but he is of the blood of the old dynasty, and many of the barons would secretly hail the overthrow of Conan, who is a nobody without royal or even noble blood. But the common people are loyal to him, and the nobility of the outlying provinces. Yet if his forces were overthrown in the battle that must first take place, and Conan himself slain, I think it would not be difficult to put Valerius on the throne. Indeed, with Conan slain, the only center of the government would be gone. He is not part of a dynasty, but only a lone adventurer."

"I wish that I might see this king," mused Xaltotun, glancing toward a silvery mirror which formed one of the panels of the wall. This mirror cast no reflection, but Xaltotun's expression showed that he understood its purpose, and Orastes nodded with the pride a good craftsman takes in the recognition of his accomplishments by a master of his craft.

"I will try to show him to you," he said. And seating himself before the mirror, he gazed hypnotically into its depths, where presently a dim shadow began to take shape.

It was uncanny, but those watching knew it was no more than the reflected image of Orastes' thought, embodied in that mirror as a wizard's thoughts are embodied in a magic crystal. It floated hazily, then leaped into startling clarity—a tall man, mightily shouldered and deep of chest, with a massive corded neck and heavily muscled limbs. He was clad in silk and velvet, with the royal lions of Aquilonia worked in gold upon his rich jupon, and the crown of Aquilonia shone on his square-cut black mane; but the great sword at his side seemed more natural to him than the regal accouterments. His brow was low and broad, his eyes a volcanic blue that smoldered as if with some inner fire. His dark, scarred, almost sinister face was that of a fighting-man, and his velvet garments could not conceal the hard, dangerous lines of his limbs.

"That man is no Hyborian!" exclaimed Xaltotun.

"No; he is a Cimmerian, one of those wild tribesmen who dwell in the gray hills of the north."

"I fought his ancestors of old," muttered Xaltotun. "Not even the kings of Acheron could conquer them."

"They still remain a terror to the nations of the south," answered Orastes. "He is a true son of that savage race, and has proved himself, thus far, unconquerable."

Xaltotun did not reply; he sat staring down at the pool of living fire that shimmered in his hand. Outside, the hound howled again, long and shudderingly.

2. The Black Wind Blows

[Table of Contents](#)

THE year of the Dragon had birth in war and pestilence and unrest. The black plague stalked through the streets of Belverus, striking down the merchant in his stall, the serf in his kennel, the knight at his banquet board. Before it the arts of the leeches were helpless. Men said it had been sent from hell as punishment for the sins of pride and lust. It was swift and deadly as the stroke of an adder. The victim's body turned purple and then black, and within a few minutes he sank down dying, and the stench of his own putrefaction was in his nostrils even before death wrenched his soul from his rotting body. A hot, roaring wind blew incessantly from the south, and the crops withered in the fields, the cattle sank and died in their tracks.

Men cried out on Mitra, and muttered against the king; for somehow, throughout the kingdom, the word was whispered that the king was secretly addicted to loathsome practises and foul debauches in the seclusion of his nighted palace. And then in that palace death stalked grinning on feet about which swirled the monstrous vapors of the plague. In one night the king died with his three sons, and the drums that thundered their dirge drowned the grim and ominous bells that rang from the carts that lumbered through the streets gathering up the rotting dead.

That night, just before dawn, the hot wind that had blown for weeks ceased to rustle evilly through the silken window curtains. Out of the north rose a great wind that roared among the towers, and there was cataclysmic thunder, and

blinding sheets of lightning, and driving rain. But the dawn shone clean and green and clear; the scorched ground veiled itself in grass, the thirsty crops sprang up anew, and the plague was gone—its miasma swept clean out of the land by the mighty wind.

Men said the gods were satisfied because the evil king and his spawn were slain, and when his young brother Tarascus was crowned in the great coronation hall, the populace cheered until the towers rocked, acclaiming the monarch on whom the gods smiled.

Such a wave of enthusiasm and rejoicing as swept the land is frequently the signal for a war of conquest. So no one was surprised when it was announced that King Tarascus had declared the truce made by the late king with their western neighbors void, and was gathering his hosts to invade Aquilonia. His reason was candid; his motives, loudly proclaimed, gilded his actions with something of the glamor of a crusade. He espoused the cause of Valerius, "rightful heir to the throne"; he came, he proclaimed, not as an enemy of Aquilonia, but as a friend, to free the people from the tyranny of a usurper and a foreigner.

If there were cynical smiles in certain quarters, and whispers concerning the king's good friend Amalric, whose vast personal wealth seemed to be flowing into the rather depleted royal treasury, they were unheeded in the general wave of fervor and zeal of Tarascus's popularity. If any shrewd individuals suspected that Amalric was the real ruler of Nemedra, behind the scenes, they were careful not to voice such heresy. And the war went forward with enthusiasm.

The king and his allies moved westward at the head of fifty thousand men—knights in shining armor with their pennons streaming above their helmets, pikemen in steel caps and brigandines, crossbowmen in leather jerkins. They crossed the border, took a frontier castle and burned three mountain villages, and then, in the valley of the Valkia, ten miles west of the boundary line, they met the hosts of Conan, king of Aquilonia—forty-five thousand knights, archers and men-at-arms, the flower of Aquilonian strength and chivalry. Only the knights of Poitain, under Prospero, had not yet arrived, for they had far to ride up from the southwestern corner of the kingdom. Tarascus had struck without warning. His invasion had come on the heels of his proclamation, without formal declaration of war.

The two hosts confronted each other across a wide, shallow valley, with rugged cliffs, and a shallow stream winding through masses of reeds and willows down the middle of the vale. The camp-followers of both hosts came down to this stream for water, and shouted insults and hurled stones across at one another. The last glints of the sun shone on the golden banner of Nemedra with the scarlet dragon, unfurled in the breeze above the pavilion of King Tarascus on an eminence near the eastern cliffs. But the shadow of the western cliffs fell like a vast purple pall across the tents and the army of Aquilonia, and upon the black banner with its golden lion that floated above King Conan's pavilion.

All night the fires flared the length of the valley, and the wind brought the call of trumpets, the clangor of arms, and

the sharp challenges of the sentries who paced their horses along either edge of the willow-grown stream.

IT was in the darkness before dawn that King Conan stirred on his couch, which was no more than a pile of silks and furs thrown on a dais, and awakened. He started up, crying out sharply and clutching at his sword. Pallantides, his commander, rushing in at the cry, saw his king sitting upright, his hand on his hilt, and perspiration dripping from his strangely pale face.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed Pallantides. "Is aught amiss?"

"What of the camp?" demanded Conan. "Are the guards out?"

"Five hundred horsemen patrol the stream, Your Majesty," answered the general. "The Nemedians have not offered to move against us in the night. They wait for dawn, even as we."

"By Crom," muttered Conan. "I awoke with a feeling that doom was creeping on me in the night."

He stared up at the great golden lamp which shed a soft glow over the velvet hangings and carpets of the great tent. They were alone; not even a slave or a page slept on the carpeted floor; but Conan's eyes blazed as they were wont to blaze in the teeth of great peril, and the sword quivered in his hand. Pallantides watched him uneasily. Conan seemed to be listening.

"Listen!" hissed the king. "Did you hear it? A furtive step!"

"Seven knights guard your tent, Your Majesty," said Pallantides. "None could approach it unchallenged."

"Not outside," growled Conan. "It seemed to sound inside the tent."

Pallantides cast a swift, startled look around. The velvet hangings merged with shadows in the corners, but if there had been anyone in the pavilion besides themselves, the general would have seen him. Again he shook his head.

"There is no one here, sire. You sleep in the midst of your host."

"I have seen death strike a king in the midst of thousands," muttered Conan. "Something that walks on invisible feet and is not seen—"

"Perhaps you were dreaming. Your Majesty," said Pallantides, somewhat perturbed.

"So I was," grunted Conan. "A devilish dream it was, too. I trod again all the long, weary roads I traveled on my way to the kingship."

He fell silent, and Pallantides stared at him unspeaking. The king was an enigma to the general, as to most of his civilized subjects. Pallantides knew that Conan had walked many strange roads in his wild, eventful life, and had been many things before a twist of Fate set him on the throne of Aquilonia.

"I saw again in the battlefield whereon I was born," said Conan, resting his chin moodily on a massive fist. "I saw myself in a panther-skin loin-clout, throwing my spear at the mountain beasts. I was a mercenary swordsman again, a hetman of the kozaki who dwell along the Zaporoska River, a corsair looting the coasts of Kush, a pirate of the Barachan Isles, a chief of the Himelian hillmen. All these things I've been, and of all these things I dreamed; all the shapes that

have been I passed like an endless procession, and their feet beat out a dirge in the sounding dust.

"But throughout my dreams moved strange, veiled figures and ghostly shadows, and a far-away voice mocked me. And toward the last I seemed to see myself lying on this dais in my tent, and a shape bent over me, robed and hooded. I lay unable to move, and then the hood fell away and a moldering skull grinned down at me. Then it was that I awoke."

"This is an evil dream, Your Majesty," said Pallantides, suppressing a shudder. "But no more."

Conan shook his head, more in doubt than in denial. He came of a barbaric race, and the superstitions and instincts of his heritage lurked close beneath the surface of his consciousness.

"I've dreamed many evil dreams," he said, "and most of them were meaningless. But by Crom, this was not like most dreams! I wish this battle were fought and won, for I've had a grisly premonition ever since King Nimed died in the black plague. Why did it cease when he died?"

"Men say he sinned—"

"Men are fools, as always," grunted Conan. "If the plague struck all who sinned, then by Crom there wouldn't be enough left to count the living! Why should the gods—who the priests tell me are just—slay five hundred peasants and merchants and nobles before they slew the king, if the whole pestilence were aimed at him? Were the gods smiting blindly, like swordsmen in a fog? By Mitra, if I aimed my strokes no straighter, Aquilonia would have had a new king long ago."

"No! The black plague's no common pestilence. It lurks in Stygian tombs, and is called forth into being only by wizards. I was a swordsman in Prince Almuric's army that invaded Stygia, and of his thirty thousand, fifteen thousand perished by Stygian arrows, and the rest by the black plague that rolled on us like a wind out of the south. I was the only man who lived."

"Yet only five hundred died in Nemedias," argued Pallantides.

"Whoever called it into being knew how to cut it short at will," answered Conan. "So I know there was something planned and diabolical about it. Someone called it forth, someone banished it when the work was completed—when Tarascus was safe on the throne and being hailed as the deliverer of the people from the wrath of the gods. By Crom, I sense a black, subtle brain behind all this. What of this stranger who men say gives counsel to Tarascus?"

"He wears a veil," answered Pallantides; "they say he is a foreigner; a stranger from Stygia."

"A stranger from Stygia!" repeated Conan scowling. "A stranger from hell, more like!—Ha! What is that?"

"The trumpets of the Nemedians!" exclaimed Pallantides. "And hark, how our own blare upon their heels! Dawn is breaking, and the captains are marshaling the hosts for the onset! Mitra be with them, for many will not see the sun go down behind the crags."

"Send my squires to me!" exclaimed Conan, rising with alacrity and casting off his velvet night-garment; he seemed to have forgotten his forebodings at the prospect of action.

"Go to the captains and see that all is in readiness. I will be with you as soon as I don my armor."

MANY of Conan's ways were inexplicable to the civilized people he ruled, and one of them was his insistence on sleeping alone in his chamber or tent. Pallantides hastened from the pavilion, clanking in the armor he had donned at midnight after a few hours' sleep. He cast a swift glance over the camp, which was beginning to swarm with activity, mail clinking and men moving about dimly in the uncertain light, among the long lines of tents. Stars still glimmered palely in the western sky, but long pink streamers stretched along the eastern horizon, and against them the dragon banner of Nemedra flung out its billowing silken folds.

Pallantides turned toward a smaller tent near by, where slept the royal squires. These were tumbling out already, roused by the trumpets. And as Pallantides called to them to hasten, he was frozen speechless by a deep fierce shout and the impact of a heavy blow inside the king's tent, followed by a heart-stopping crash of a falling body. There sounded a low laugh that turned the general's blood to ice.

Echoing the cry, Pallantides wheeled and rushed back into the pavilion. He cried out again as he saw Conan's powerful frame stretched out on the carpet. The king's great two-handed sword lay near his hand, and a shattered tent-pole seemed to show where his sword had fallen. Pallantides' sword was out, and he glared about the tent, but nothing met his gaze. Save for the king and himself it was empty, as it had been when he left it.

"Your Majesty!" Pallantides threw himself on his knee beside the fallen giant.

Conan's eyes were open; they blazed up at him with full intelligence and recognition. His lips writhed, but no sound came forth. He seemed unable to move.

Voices sounded without. Pallantides rose swiftly and stepped to the door. The royal squires and one of the knights who guarded the tent stood there. "We heard a sound within," said the knight apologetically. "Is all well with the king?"

Pallantides regarded him searchingly.

"None has entered or left the pavilion this night?"

"None save yourself, my lord," answered the knight, and Pallantides could not doubt his honesty.

"The king stumbled and dropped his sword," said Pallantides briefly. "Return to your post."

As the knight turned away, the general covertly motioned to the five royal squires, and when they had followed him in, he drew the flap closely. They turned pale at the sight of the king stretched upon the carpet, but Pallantides' quick gesture checked their exclamations.

The general bent over him again, and again Conan made an effort to speak. The veins in his temples and the cords in his neck swelled with his efforts, and he lifted his head clear off the ground. Voice came at last, mumbling and half intelligible.

"The thing—the thing in the corner!"

Pallantides lifted his head and looked fearfully about him. He saw the pale faces of the squires in the lamplight, the

velvet shadows that lurked along the walls of the pavilion. That was all.

"There is nothing here. Your Majesty," he said.

"It was there, in the corner," muttered the king, tossing his lion-maned head from side to side in his efforts to rise. "A man—at least he looked like a man—wrapped in rags like a mummy's bandages, with a moldering cloak drawn about him, and a hood. All I could see was his eyes, as he crouched there in the shadows. I thought he was a shadow himself, until I saw his eyes. They were like black jewels.

"I made at him and swung my sword, but I missed him clean—how, Crom knows—and splintered that pole instead. He caught my wrist as I staggered off balance, and his fingers burned like hot iron. All the strength went out of me, and the floor rose and struck me like a club. Then he was gone, and I was down, and—curse him!—I can't move! I'm paralyzed!"

Pallantides lifted the giant's hand, and his flesh crawled. On the king's wrist showed the blue marks of long, lean fingers. What hand could grip so hard as to leave its print on that thick wrist? Pallantides remembered that low laugh he had heard as he rushed into the tent, and cold perspiration beaded his skin. It had not been Conan who laughed.

"This is a thing diabolical!" whispered a trembling squire. "Men say the children of darkness war for Tarascus!"

"BE silent!" ordered Pallantides sternly.

Outside, the dawn was dimming the stars. A light wind sprang up from the peaks, and brought the fanfare of a thousand trumpets. At the sound a convulsive shudder ran

through the king's mighty form. Again the veins in his temples knotted as he strove to break the invisible shackles which crushed him down.

"Put my harness on me and tie me into my saddle," he whispered. "I'll lead the charge yet!"

Pallantides shook his head, and a squire plucked his skirt.

"My lord, we are lost if the host learns the king has been smitten! Only he could have led us to victory this day."

"Help me lift him on the dais," answered the general.

They obeyed, and laid the helpless giant on the furs, and spread a silken cloak over him. Pallantides turned to the five squires and searched their pale faces long before he spoke.

"Our lips must be sealed for ever as to what happens in this tent," he said at last. "The kingdom of Aquilonia depends upon it. One of you go and fetch me the officer Valannus, who is a captain of the Pellian spearmen."

The squire indicated bowed and hastened from the tent, and Pallantides stood staring down at the stricken king, while outside trumpets blared, drums thundered, and the roar of the multitudes rose in the growing dawn. Presently the squire returned with the officer Pallantides had named—a tall man, broad and powerful, built much like the king. Like him, also, he had thick black hair. But his eyes were gray and he did not resemble Conan in his features.

"The king is stricken by a strange malady," said Pallantides briefly. "A great honor is yours; you are to wear his armor and ride at the head of the host today. None must know that it is not the king who rides."

"It is an honor for which a man might gladly give up his life," stammered the captain, overcome by the suggestion.