

An Offering to the Moon

Clark Ashton Smith

“I believe,” announced Morley, “that the roofless temples of Mu were not all devoted to solar worship, but that many of them were consecrated to the moon. And I am sure that the one we have now discovered proves my point. These hieroglyphics are lunar symbols beyond a doubt.”

Thorway, his fellow-archaeologist, looked at Morley with a surprise not altogether due to the boldly authoritative pronouncement. He was struck anew by the singularity of Morley’s tones and expression. The dreamy, beardless, olive features, that seemed to repeat some aboriginal Aryan type, were transfigured by a look of ecstatic absorption. Thorway himself was not incapable of enthusiasm when the occasion seemed to warrant it; but this well-nigh religious ardor was beyond his comprehension. He wondered (not for the only time) if his companion’s mentality were not a trifle... eccentric.

However, he mumbled a rejoinder that was deferential even though non-committal. Morley had not only financed the expedition, but had been paying a liberal stipend to Thorway for more than two years. So Thorway could afford to be respectful, even though he was a little tired of his employer’s odd and unauthorized notions, and the interminable series of sojourns they had made on Melanesian isles. From the monstrous and primordial stone images of Easter Island to the truncated pyramidal columns of the Ladrones, they had visited all the far-strewn remains which are held to prove the former existence of a great continent in the mid-Pacific. Now, on one of the lesser Marquesas, hitherto unexplored, they had located the massive walls of a large temple-like edifice. As usual, it had been difficult to find, for such places were universally feared and shunned by the natives, who believed them haunted by the immemorial dead, and could not be hired to visit them or even to reveal their whereabouts. It was Morley who had stumbled upon the place, almost as if he were led by a subconscious instinct.

Truly, they had made a significant discovery, as even Thorway was compelled to admit. Except for a few of the colossal topmost stones, which had fallen or splintered away, the walls were in well-nigh perfect preservation. The place was surrounded by a tangle of palms and jackfruit and various tropical shrubs; but somehow none of them had taken root within the walls. Portions of a paved floor were still extant, amid centurial heaps of rubble. In the center was a huge, square block, rising four feet above the ground-level, which might well have served as an altar. It was carved with rude symbols which appeared to represent the moon in all its digits, and was curiously grooved across the top from the middle to one side with a trough that became deeper toward the edge. Like all other buildings of the sort, it was plain that the temple had never supported a roof.

“Yes, the symbols are undoubtedly lunar,” admitted Thorway.

“Also,” Morley went on, “I believe that rites of human sacrifice were performed in these temples. Oblations of blood were poured not only to the sun but to the moon.”

“The idea is maintainable, of course,” rejoined Thorway. “Human sacrifice was pretty widespread at a certain stage of evolution. It may well have been practiced by the people who built this edifice.”

Morley did not perceive the dryness and formality of his confrere’s assent. He was preoccupied with feelings and ideas, some of which could hardly have been the natural result of his investigations. Even as in visiting many others of the ancient remains, he had been troubled by a nervous agitation which was a compound of irresoluble awe and terror, of nameless, eager fascination and expectancy. Here, among these mighty walls, the feeling became stronger than it had been anywhere else; and it mounted to a pitch that was veritably distracting, and akin to the disturbed awareness that ushers in the illusions of delirium.

His idea, that the temple was a place of lunar worship, had seized him almost with the authority of an actual recollection, rather than a closely reasoned inference. Also, he was troubled by sensory impressions that bordered upon the hallucinative. Though the day was tropically warm, he was conscious of a strange chill that emanated from the walls—a chill as of bygone cycles; and it seemed to him that the narrow shadows wrought by a meridian sun were peopled with unseen faces. More than once, he was prompted to rub his eyes, for ghostly films of color, like flashes of yellow and purple garments, came and went in the most infinitesimal fraction of time. Though the air was utterly still, he had the sense of perpetual movement all around him, of the passing to and fro of intangible throngs. It was many thousand years, in all likelihood, since human feet had trodden these pavements; but Morley could have cried aloud with the imminence of the longdead ages. It appeared to him, in a brief glimpse, that his whole life, as well as his journeyings and explorations in the South Seas, had been but a devious return to some earlier state of being; and that the resumption of this state was now at hand. All this, however, continued to perplex him mightily: it was as if he had suffered the intrusion of an alien entity.

He heard himself speaking to Thorway, and the words were unfamiliar and remote, as if they had issued from the lips of another.

“They were a joyous and a child-like race, those people of Mu,” he was saying; “but not altogether joyous, not wholly child-like. There was a dark side... and a dark worship—the cult of death and night, personified by the moon, whose white, implacable, frozen lips were appeased only by the warm blood that flowed upon her altars. They caught the blood in goblets as it ran from the stone grooves... they raised it aloft... and the goblets were swiftly drained in mid-air by the remote goddess, as if the sacrifice had proven acceptable.”

“But how do you know all this?” Thorway was quite amazed, no less by his companion’s air than by the actual words. Morley, he thought, was less like a modern, every-day American than ever. He remembered, inconsequently, how all the natives of the various island groups had taken to Morley with an odd friendliness, without the reserve and suspicion often accorded to other white men. They had even warned Morley against the guardian spirits of the ruins—and they did not always trouble to warn others. It was almost as if they regarded him as being in some manner akin to themselves. Thorway wondered... though he was essentially unimaginative.

“I tell you, I know,” Morley said, as he walked up and down beside the altar. “I have seen...” his voice trailed off in a frozen whisper, and he seemed to stiffen in every limb, and stood still as with some momentary catalepsy. His face grew deadly pale, his eyes were set and staring. Then, from between rigid lips; he uttered the strange words, “Rhalu muvasa than,” in a monotonous, hieratic tone, like a sort of invocation.

Morley could not have told what it was that he felt and saw in that moment. He was no longer his known and wonted self; and the man beside him was an unheeded stranger. But he could remember nothing afterwards—not even the odd vocals he had uttered whatever his mental experience may have been, it was like a dream that fades instantly when one awakens. The moment passed, the extreme rigidity left his limbs and features, and he resumed his interrupted pacing.

His confrere was staring at him in astonishment, not unmingled with solicitude.

“Are you ill? The sun is pretty hot today. And one should be careful. Perhaps we had best return to the schooner. ”

Morley gave a mechanical assent and followed Thorway from the ruins towards the seashore, where the schooner they had used in their voyaging was anchored in a little harbor less than a mile distant. His mind was full of confusion and darkness. He no longer felt the queer emotions that had seized him beside the altar, nor could he recall them otherwise than dimly. All the while he was trying to recollect something which lay just below the rim of memory; something very momentous, which he had forgotten long, long ago.

Lying in a cane couch beneath an awning on the schooner’s deck, Morley drifted back to his normal plane of consciousness. He was not unwilling to accept Thorway’s suggestion, that he had suffered a touch of sun among the ruins. His ghostly sensations, the delirium-like approach to a state of awareness which had no relation to his daily life, were now unlikely and unreal, In an effort to dismiss them altogether, he went over in his mind the whole of the investigative tour he had undertaken, and the events of the years preceding it.

He remembered his youthful luctations against poverty, his desire for that wealth and leisure which alone makes possible the pursuit of every chimera; and his slow but accelerative progress when once he had acquired a modicum of capital and had gone into business for himself as an importer of Oriental rugs. Then he recalled the chance inception of his archaeological enthusiasm—the reading of an illustrated article which described the ancient remains on Easter Island. The insoluble strangeness of these little-known relics had thrilled him profoundly, though he knew not why; and, he had resolved to visit them some day. The theory of a lost continent in the Pacific appealed to him with an almost intimate lure and imaginative charm; it became his own particular chimera, though he could not have traced to their psychal origin the feelings behind his interest. He read everything procurable on the subject; and as soon as his leisure permitted, he made a trip to Easter Island. A year later, he was able to leave his business indefinitely in the hands of an efficient manager. He hired Thorway, a professional archaeologist with much experience in Italy and Asia Minor, to accompany him; and purchasing an old schooner, manned by a Swedish crew and captain, he had set out on his long, devious voyage among the islands.

Going over all this in his thoughts, Morley decided that it was now time to return home. He had learned all that was verifiable regarding the mysterious ruins. The study had fascinated him as nothing else in his life had ever done; but for some reason his health was beginning to suffer. Perhaps he had thrown himself too assiduously into his labors; the ruins had absorbed him too deeply. He must get away from them, must not risk a renewal of the queer, delusory sensations he had experienced. He recalled the superstitions of the natives, and wondered if there were something in them after all; if unwholesome influences were attached to those primeval stones. Did ghosts return or linger from a world that had been buried beneath the waves for unknown ages? Damn it, he had almost felt at times as if he were some sort of revenant himself.

He called to Thorway, who was standing beside the rail in conversation with one of the Norse sailors.

“I think we have done enough for one voyage, Thorway,” he said. “We will lift anchor in the morning and return to San Francisco.”

Thorway made little effort to conceal his relief. He did not consider the Polynesian isles a very fruitful field for research: the ruins were too old and fragmentary, the period to which they belonged was too conjectural, and did not deeply engage his interest.

“I agree,” he rejoined. “Also, if you will pardon me for saying it, I don’t think the South Sea climate is one of ideal salubriousness. I’ve noticed occasionally indispositions on your part for some time past.”

Morley nodded in a weary acquiescence. It would have been impossible to tell Thorway his actual thoughts and emotions. The man was abysmally unimaginative.

He only hoped that Thorway did not think him a little mad—though, after all, it was quite immaterial.

The day wore on; and the swift, purpureal darkness of eventide was curtailed by the rising of a full moon which inundated sea and land with warm, ethereal quicksilver. At dinner, Morley was lost in a taciturn abstraction; and Thorway was discreetly voluble, but made no reference to the late archaeological find. Svensen, the captain, who ate with them, maintained a monosyllabic reticence, even when he was told of the proposed return to San Francisco. After eating, Morley excused himself and went back to the cane couch. Somewhat to his relief, he was not joined by Thorway.

Moonlight had always aroused in Morley a vague but profound emotion. Even as the ruins had done, it stirred among the shadows of his mind a million ghostly intimations; and the thrill he felt was at times not unalloyed with a cryptic awe and trepidation, akin, perhaps, to the primal fear of darkness itself.

Now, as he gazed at the tropic plenilune, he conceived the sudden and obsessing idea that the orb was somehow larger, and its light more brilliant than usual; even as they might have been in ages when the moon and earth were much younger. Then he was possessed by a troublous doubt, by an inenarrable sense of dislocation, and a dream-like vagueness which attached itself to the world about him. A wave of terror surged upon him, and he felt that he was slipping irretrievably away from all familiar things. Then the terror ebbed; far that which he had lost was far off and incredible; and a world of circumstances long-forgot was assuming or resuming, the tinge of familiarity.

What, he wondered, was he doing on this queer ship? It was the night of the sacrifice to Rhalu, the selenic goddess; and he, Matla, was to play an essential part in the ceremony. He must reach the temple ere the moon had mounted to her zenith above the star-stone. And it now lacked only an hour of the appointed time.

He rose and peered about with questioning eyes. The deck was deserted, for it was unnecessary to keep watch in that tranquil harbor. Svensen and the mate were doubtless drinking themselves to sleep as usual; the sailors were playing their eternal whist and pedro; and Thorway was in his cabin, probably writing a no-less-eternal monograph on Etruscan tombs. It was only in the most remote and exiguous manner that Morley recollected their existence.

Somehow, he managed to recall that there was a boat which he and Thorway had used in their visits to the isle; and that this boat was moored to the schooner's side. With a tread as

lithe and supple as that of a native, he was over the rail and was rowing silently shoreward. A, hundred yards, or little more, and then he stood on the moon-washed sand.

Now he was climbing the palm-clustered hill above the shore, and was heading toward the temple. The air was suffused with a primal, brooding warmth, with the scent, of colossal flowers and ferns not known to modern botanists. He could see them towering beside his way with their thick, archaic fronds and petals, though such things have not lifted to the moon for aeons. And mounting the crest of the hill, which had dominated the little isle and had looked down to the sea on two sides, he saw in the mellow light the far, unbounded reaches of a softly rolling plain, and sealess horizons everywhere, that glowed with the golden fires of cities. And he knew the names of these cities, and recalled the opulent life of Mu, whose prosperity had of late years been menaced by Atlantean earthquakes and volcanic upheavals. These, it was believed, were owing to the wrath of Rhalu, the goddess who controlled the planetary forces; and human blood was being poured in all her fanes to placate the mysterious deity.

Morley (or Matla) could have remembered a million things; he could have called to mind the simple but strange events of his entire pre-existence in Mu, and the lore and history of the far-flung continent. But there was little room in his consciousness for anything but the destined drama of the night. Long ago (how long he was not sure) he had been chosen among his people for an awful honor; but his heart had failed him ere the time ordained, and he had fled. Tonight, however, he would not flee. A solemn religious rapture, not untinged with fear, guided his steps toward the temple of the goddess.

As he went on, he noticed his raiment, and was puzzled. Why was he wearing these ugly and unseemly garments? He began to remove them and to cast them aside one by one. Nakedness was ordained by sacerdotal law for the role he was to play.

He heard the soft-vowelled murmur of voices about him, and saw the multi-colored robes or gleaming amber flesh of forms that flitted among the archaic plants. The priests and worshippers were also on their way to the temple.

His excitement rose, it became more mystical and more rhapsodic as he neared his destination. His being was flooded by the superstitious awe of ancient man, by the dreadful reverence due to the unknown powers of nature. He peered with a solemn trepidation at the moon as it rose higher in the heavens, and saw in its rounded orb the features of a divinity both benign and malevolent.

Now he beheld the temple, looming whitely above the tops of titan fronds. The walls were no longer ruinous, their fallen blocks were wholly restored. His visit to the place with Thorway was dim as a fever fantasy; but other visits during his life as Matla, and ceremonials of the priests of Rhalu which he had once beheld, were clear and immediate in

his memory. He knew the faces he would see, and the ritual wherein he would participate. He thought mostly in pictures; but the words of a strange vocabulary were ready for his recollection; and phrases drifted through his mind with unconscious ease; phrases that would have seemed untelligible gibberish an hour before.

Matla was aware of the concentrated gaze of several hundred eyes as he entered the great, roofless fane. The place was thronged with people, whose round features were of a pre-Aryan type; and many of the faces were familiar to him. But at that moment all of them were parcel of a mystic horror, and were awesome and obscure as the night. Nothing was clear before him, save an opening in the throng, which led to the altar-stone around which the priests of Rhalu were gathered, and wherein Rhalu herself looked down in relentless, icy splendor from an almost vertical elevation.

He went forward with firm steps. The priests, who were clad in lunar purple and yellow, received him in an impassive silence. Counting them, he found that there were only six instead of the usual seven. One there was among them who carried a large, shallow goblet of silver; but the seventh, whose hand would lift the long and curving knife of some copperish metal, had not yet arrived.

Thorway had found it curiously hard to apply himself to the half-written monograph on Etruscan tombs. An obscure and exasperating restlessness finally impelled him to abandon his wooing of the reluctant muse of archaeology. In a state of steadily mounting irritation, wishing that the bothersome and unprofitable voyage were over, he went on deck.

The moonlight dazzled him with its preternatural brilliance, and he did not perceive for a few moments that the cane couch was empty. When he saw that Morley was gone, he experienced a peculiar mixture of alarm and irritation. He felt sure that Morley had not returned to his cabin. Stepping to the schooner's shoreward side, he noted with little surprise the absence of the moored boat. Morley must have gone ashore for a moonlight visit to the ruined temple; and Thorway frowned heavily at this new presumptive evidence of his employer's eccentricity and aberration. An unwonted responsibility: deep and solemn, stirred him. He seemed to hear an inward injunction, a half-familiar voice, bidding him to take care of Morley. This unhealthy and exorbitant interest in a more than problematic past should be discouraged or at least supervised.

Very quickly, he made up his mind as to what he should do. Going below, he called two of the Swedish sailors from their game of pedro and had them row him ashore in the ship's dinghy. As they neared the beach the boat used by Morley was plainly visible in the plummy shadow of a clump of seaward-leaning palms.

Thorway, without offering any explanation of his purpose in going ashore, told the sailors to return to the ship. Then, following the well-worn trail toward the temple, he mounted the

island-slope.

Step by step, as he went on, he became aware of a strange difference in the vegetation. What were these monstrous ferns and primordial-looking flowers about him? Surely it was some weird trick of the moonlight, distorting the familiar palms and shrubs. He had seen nothing of the sort in his daytime visits, and such forms were impossible, anyway. Then, by degrees, he was beset with terrible doubt and bewilderment. There came to him the ineffably horrifying sensation of passing beyond his proper self, beyond all that he knew as legitimate and verifiable. Fantastic, unspeakable thoughts, alien, abnormal impulses, thronged upon him from the sorcerous glare of the effulgent moon. He shuddered at repellent but insistent memories that were not his own, at the ghastly compulsion of an unbelievable command. What on earth was possessing him? Was he going mad like Morley? The moon-bright isle was like some bottomless abyss of nightmare fantasy, into which he sank with nightmare terror.

He sought to recover his hard, materialistic sanity, his belief in the safe literality of things. Then, suddenly and without surprise, he was no longer Thorway.

He knew the real purpose for which he had come ashore—the solemn rite in which he was to play an awful but necessary part. The ordained hour was near—the worshippers, the sacrifice and the six fellow-priests awaited his coming in the immemorial fane of Rhalu.

Unassisted by any of the priests, Matla had stretched himself on the cold altar. How long he lay there, waiting, he could not tell. But at last, by the rustling stir and murmur of the throng, he knew that the seventh priest had arrived.

All fear had left him, as if he were already beyond the pain and suffering of earth. But he knew with a precision well-nigh real as physical sight and sensation the use which would be made of the copperish knife and the silver goblet.

He lay gazing at the wan heavens, and saw dimly, with far-focused eyes, the leaning face of the seventh priest. The face was doubly familiar... but he had forgotten something. He did not try to remember. Already it seemed to him that the white moon was drawing nearer, was stooping from her celestial station to quaff the awaited sacrifice. Her light blinded him with unearthly fulgor; but he saw dimly the flash of the falling knife ere it entered his heart. There was an instant of tearing pain that plunged on and on through his body, as if its tissues were a deep abyss. Then a sudden darkness took the heavens and blotted out the face of Rhalu; and all things, even pain, were erased for Matla by the black mist of an eternal nothing.

In the morning, Svensen and his sailors waited very patiently for the return of Morley and Thorway from the island. When afternoon came and the two were still absent, Svensen

decided that it was time to investigate.

He had received orders to lift anchor for San Francisco that day; but he could not very well depart without Thorway and Morley.

With one of the crew, he rowed ashore and climbed the hill to the ruins. The roofless temple was empty, save for the plants that had taken root in the crevices of its pavement. Svensen and the sailor, looking about for the archaeologists, were horrified from their stolidity by the stains of newly dried blood that lined the great groove in the altar-block to its edge.

They summoned the remainder of the crew. A daylong search of the little island, however, was without result. The natives knew nothing of the whereabouts of Morley and Thorway, and were queerly reticent even in avowing their ignorance. There was no place where the two men could have hidden themselves, granting that they had any reason for a procedure so peculiar. Svensen and his men gave it up. If they had been imaginative, it might have seemed to them that the archaeologists had vanished bodily into the past.

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