

The God in the Bowl

Robert E. Howard

Arus the watchman grasped his crossbow with shaky hands, and he felt beads of clammy perspiration on his skin as he stared at the unlovely corpse sprawling on the polished floor before him. It is not pleasant to come upon Death in a lonely place at midnight.

Arus stood in a vast corridor, lighted by huge candles in niches along the walls. These walls were hung with black velvet tapestries, and between the tapestries hung shields and crossed weapons of fantastic make. Here and there, too, stood figures of curious gods—images carved of stone or rare wood, or cast of bronze, iron or silver—mirrored in the gleaming black mahogany floor.

Arus shuddered; he had never become used to the place, although he had worked there as watchman for some months. It was a fantastic establishment, the great museum and antique house which men called Kallian Publico's Temple, with its rarities from all over the world—and now, in the lonesomeness of midnight, Arus stood in the great silent hall and stared at the sprawling corpse that had been the rich and powerful owner of the Temple.

It entered even the dull brain of the watchman that the man looked strangely different now, than when he rode along the Palian Way in his golden chariot, arrogant and dominant, with his dark eyes glinting with magnetic vitality. Men who had hated and feared Kallian Publico would scarcely have recognized him now as he lay like a disintegrated tun of fat, his rich robe half torn from him, and his purple tunic awry. His face was blackened, his eyes almost starting from his head, and his tongue lolled blackly from his gaping mouth. His fat hands were thrown out as in a gesture of curious futility. On the thick fingers gems glittered.

'Why didn't they take his rings?' muttered the watchman uneasily, then he started and glared, the short hairs prickling at the nape of his neck. Through the dark silken hangings that masked one of the many doorways opening into the hallway, came a figure.

Arus saw a tall powerfully built youth, naked but for a loincloth, and sandals strapped high about his ankles. His skin was burned brown as by the suns of the wastelands, and Arus glanced nervously at the broad shoulders, massive chest and heavy arms. A single look at the moody, broad-browed features told the watchman that the man was no Nemedian. From under a mop of unruly black hair smoldered a pair of dangerous blue eyes. A long sword hung in a leather scabbard at his girdle.

Arus felt his skin crawl, and he fingered his crossbow tensely, of half a mind to drive a bolt through the stranger's body without parley, yet fearful of what might happen if he failed to inflict death at the first shot.

The stranger looked at the body on the floor more in curiosity than surprise.

‘Why did you kill him?’ asked Arus nervously.

The other shook his tousled head.

‘I didn’t kill him,’ he answered, speaking Nemedian with a barbaric accent. ‘Who is he?’

‘Kallian Publico,’ replied Arus, edging back.

A flicker of interest showed in the moody blue eyes.

‘The owner of the house?’

‘Aye.’ Arus had edged his way to the wall, and now he took hold of a thick velvet rope which swung there, and jerked it violently. From the street outside sounded the strident clang of the bell that hung before all shops and establishments to summon the watch.

The stranger started.

‘Why did you do that?’ he asked. ‘It will fetch the watchman.’

‘I am the watchman, knave,’ answered Arus, bracing his rocking courage. ‘Stand where you are; don’t move or I’ll loose a bolt through you.’

His finger was on the trigger of his arbalest, the wicked square head of the quarrel leveled full on the other’s broad breast. The stranger scowled, and his dark face was lowering. He showed no fear, but seemed to be hesitating in his mind as to whether he should obey the command or chance a sudden break of some kind. Arus licked his lips and his blood turned cold as he plainly saw indecision struggle with a murderous intent in the foreigner’s cloudy eyes.

Then he heard a door crash open, and a medley of voices, and he drew a deep breath of amazed thankfulness. The stranger tensed and glared worriedly, like a startled hunting beast, as half a dozen men entered the hall. All but one wore the scarlet tunic of the Numalian police, were girt with stabbing swords and carried bills—long-shafted weapons, half pike, half axe.

‘What devil’s work is this?’ exclaimed the foremost man, whose cold gray eyes and lean keen features, no less than his civilian garments, set him apart from his burly companions.

‘By Mitra, Demetrio!’ exclaimed Arus thankfully. ‘Fortune is assuredly with me tonight. I had no hope that the watch would answer the summons so swiftly—or that you would be with them!’

‘I was making the rounds with Dionus,’ answered Demetrio. ‘We were just passing the Temple when the watch-bell clanged. But who is this? Mitra! The master of the Temple himself!’

‘No other,’ replied Arus. ‘And foully murdered. It is my duty to walk about the building steadily all night, because, as you know, there is an immense amount of wealth stored here. Kallian Publico had rich patrons—scholars, princes and wealthy collectors of rarities. Well, only a few minutes ago I tried the door which opens on the portico, and found it to be only bolted. The door is provided with a bolt, which works both from within or without, and a great lock which can be worked only from without. Only Kallian Publico had a key to that, the key which you see now hanging at his girdle.

‘Naturally my suspicions were roused, for Kallian Publico always locks the door with the great lock when he closes the Temple; and I had not seen him return since he left earlier in the evening for his villa in the eastern suburbs of the city. I have a key that works the bolt; I entered and found the body lying as you see. I have not touched it.’

‘So,’ Demetrio’s keen eyes swept the somber stranger. ‘And who is this?’

‘The murderer, without doubt!’ cried Arus. ‘He came from that door yonder. He is a northern barbarian of some sort—a Hyperborean or a Bossonian, perhaps.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Demetrio.

‘I am Conan,’ answered the barbarian. ‘I am a Cimmerian.’

‘Did you kill this man?’

The Cimmerian shook his head.

‘Answer me!’ snapped the questioner.

An angry glint rose in the moody blue eyes.

‘I am no dog,’ he replied resentfully.

‘Oh, an insolent fellow!’ sneered Demetrio’s companion, a big man wearing the insignia of prefect of police. ‘An independent cur! One of these citizens with rights, eh? I’ll soon knock

it out of him! Here, you! Come clean! Why did you murder—'

'Just a moment, Dionus,' ordered Demetrio curtly. 'Fellow, I am chief of the Inquisitorial Council of the city of Numalia. You had best tell me why you are here, and if you are not the murderer, prove it.'

The Cimmerian hesitated. He was not afraid, but slightly bewildered, as a barbarian always is when confronted by the evidence of civilized networks and systems, the workings of which are so baffling and mysterious to him.

'While he's thinking it over,' rapped Demetrio, turning to Arus, 'tell me—did you see Kallian Publico leave the Temple this evening?'

'No, he's usually gone when I arrive to begin my sentry-go. But the great door was bolted and locked.'

'Could he have entered the building again without your having seen him?'

'Why, it's possible, but hardly probable. The Temple is large, and I walk clear around it in a few minutes. If he had returned from his villa, he would of course have come in his chariot, for it is a long way—and who ever heard of Kallian Publico travelling otherwise? Even if I had been on the other side of the Temple, I'd have heard the wheels of the chariot on the cobble- stones, and I've heard no such thing, nor seen any chariots, except those which always pass along the streets just at dusk.'

'And the door was locked earlier in the night?'

'I'll swear to it. I try all doors several times during the night. The door was locked on the outside until perhaps half an hour ago—that was the last time I tried it, until I found it unlocked.'

'You heard no cries or struggles?'

'No. But that's not strange. The walls of the Temple are so thick, they're practically sound-proof—an effect increased by the heavy hangings.'

'Why go to all this trouble of questions and speculations?' complained the burly prefect. 'It's much easier to beat a confession out of a suspect. Here's our man, no doubt about it. Let's take him to the Court of Justice—I'll get a statement if I have to smash his bones to pulp.'

Demetrio looked at the barbarian.

‘You understand what he said?’ asked the Inquisitor. ‘What have you to say?’

‘That any man who touches me will quickly be greeting his ancestors in hell,’ the Cimmerian ground between his powerful teeth, his eyes glinting quick flames of dangerous anger.

‘Why did you come here, if not to kill this man?’ pursued Demetrio.

‘I came to steal,’ sullenly answered the other.

‘To steal what?’ rapped the Inquisitor.

‘Food,’ the reply came after an instant’s hesitation.

‘That’s a lie!’ snapped Demetrio. ‘You knew there was no food here. Don’t lie to me. Tell me the truth or—’

The Cimmerian laid his hand on his sword hilt, and the gesture was as fraught with menace as the lifting of a tiger’s lip to bare his fangs.

‘Save your bullying for the fools who fear you,’ he growled, blue fires smoldering in his eyes. ‘I’m no city-bred Nemedian to cringe before your hired dogs. I’ve killed better men than you for less than this.’

Dionus, who had opened his mouth to bellow in wrath, closed it suddenly. The watchmen shifted their bills uncertainly and glanced at Demetrio for orders. They were struck speechless at hearing the all-powerful police thus bearded and expected a command to seize the barbarian. But Demetrio did not give it. He knew, if the others were too stupid to know, the steel-trap muscles and blinding quickness of men raised beyond civilization’s frontiers where life was a continual battle for existence, and he had no desire to loose the barbaric frenzy of the Cimmerian if it could be avoided. Besides, there was a doubt in his mind.

‘I have not accused you of killing Kallian,’ he snapped. ‘But you must admit the appearances are against you. How did you enter the Temple?’

‘I hid in the shadows of the warehouse which stands behind this building,’ Conan answered grudgingly. ‘When this dog—’ jerking a thumb at Arus—‘passed by and rounded the corner, I ran quickly to the wall and scaled it—’

‘A lie!’ broke in Arus. ‘No man could climb that straight wall!’

‘Did you ever see a Cimmerian scale a sheer cliff?’ asked Demetrio impatiently. ‘I am

conducting this investigation. Go on, Conan.'

'The corner is decorated with carvings,' said the Cimmerian. 'It was easy to climb. I gained the roof before this dog came around the building again. I went across the roof until I came upon a trap-door which was fastened with an iron bolt that went through it and was locked on the inside. I was forced to hew the bolt in twain with my sword—'

Arus, remembering the thickness of that bolt, gulped involuntarily and moved further back from the barbarian, who scowled abstractedly at him, and continued.

'I feared the noise might wake somebody, but it was a chance I had to take. I passed through the trap-door and came into an upper chamber. I didn't pause there, but came straightway to the stair—'

'How did you know where the stair was?' snapped the Inquisitor. 'I know that only Kallian's servants and his rich patrons were ever allowed in those upper rooms.'

A dogged stubbornness shadowed Conan's eyes and he remained silent.

'What did you do after you reached the stair?' demanded Demetrio.

'I came straight down it,' muttered the Cimmerian. 'It let into the chamber behind yonder curtained door. As I came down the stairs I heard the noise of a door being opened. When I looked through the hangings I saw this dog standing over the dead man.'

'Why did you come from your hiding place?'

'It was dark when I saw the watchman outside the Temple. When I saw him here I thought he was a thief too. It was not until he jerked the watch-bell rope and lifted his bow that I knew he was the watchman.'

'But even so,' persisted the Inquisitor, 'why did you reveal yourself?'

'I thought perhaps he had come to steal what—' the Cimmerian checked himself suddenly as if he had said too much.

'—What you had come after, yourself!' finished Demetrio. 'You have told me more than you intended! You came here with a definite purpose. You did not, by your own admission, tarry in the upper rooms, where the richest goods are generally stored. You knew the plan of the building—you were sent here by someone who knows the Temple well to steal some special thing!'

‘And to kill Kallian Publico!’ exclaimed Dionus. ‘By Mitra, we’ve hit it! Grab him, men! We’ll have a confession before morning!’

With a heathen curse Conan leaped back, whipping out his sword with a viciousness that made the keen blade hum.

‘Back, if you value your dog-lives!’ he snarled, his blue eyes blazing. ‘Because you dare to torture shopkeepers and strip and beat harlots to make them talk, don’t think you can lay your fat paws on a hillman! I’ll take some of you to hell with me! Fumble with your bow, watchman—I’ll burst your guts with my heel before this night’s work is over!’

‘Wait!’ interposed Demetrio. ‘Call your dogs off, Dionus. I’m not convinced that he is the murderer. You fool,’ he added in a whisper, ‘wait until we can summon more men, or trick him into laying down his sword.’ Demetrio did not wish to forgo the advantage of his civilized mind by allowing matters to change to a physical basis, where the wild beast ferocity of the barbarian might even balance the odds against him.

‘Very well,’ grunted Dionus grudgingly. ‘Fall back, men, but keep an eye on him.’

‘Give me your sword,’ said Demetrio.

‘Take it if you can,’ snarled Conan. Demetrio shrugged his shoulders.

‘Very well. But don’t try to escape. Four men with crossbows watch the house on the outside. We always throw a cordon about a house before we enter it.’

The barbarian lowered his blade, though he only slightly relaxed the tense watchfulness of his attitude. Demetrio turned again to the corpse.

‘Strangled,’ he muttered. ‘Why strangle him when a sword- stroke is so much quicker and surer? These Cimmerians are a bloody race, born with a sword in their hand, as it were; I never heard of them killing a man in this manner.’

‘Perhaps to divert suspicion,’ muttered Dionus.

‘Possibly.’ He felt the body with experienced hands. ‘Dead possibly half an hour,’ he muttered. ‘If Conan tells the truth about when he entered the Temple he would hardly have had time to commit the murder before Arus entered. But he may be lying—he might have broken in earlier.’

‘I climbed the wall after Arus made the last round,’ Conan growled.

‘So you say.’ Demetrio brooded for a space over the dead man’s throat, which had been literally crushed to a pulp of purplish flesh. The head sagged awry on splintered vertebrae. Demetrio shook his head in doubt.

‘Why should a murderer use a pliant cable apparently thicker than a man’s arm?’ he muttered. ‘And what terrible constriction was applied to so crush the man’s heavy neck.’

He rose and walked to the nearest door opening into the corridor.

‘Here is a bust knocked from a stand near the door,’ he said, ‘and here the polished floor is scratched and the hangings in the doorway are pulled awry as if a clutching hand had grasped them—perhaps for support. Kallian Publico must have been attacked in that room. Perhaps he broke away from the assailant, or dragged the fellow with him as he fled. Anyway, he ran staggeringly out into the corridor where the murderer must have followed and finished him.’

‘And if this heathen isn’t the murderer, where is he?’ demanded the prefect.

‘I haven’t exonerated the Cimmerian yet,’ snapped the Inquisitor. ‘But we’ll investigate that room and—’ He halted and wheeled, listening. From the street had sounded a sudden rattle of chariot wheels, which approached rapidly, then ceased abruptly.

‘Dionus!’ snapped the Inquisitor. ‘Send two men to find that chariot. Bring the driver here.’

‘From the sound,’ said Arus, who was familiar with all the noises of the street, ‘I’d say it stopped in front of Promero’s house, just on the other side of the silk-merchant’s shop.’

‘Who is Promero?’ asked Demetrio.

‘Kallian Publico’s chief clerk.’

‘Bring him here with the chariot driver,’ snapped Demetrio. ‘We’ll wait until they come before we examine that room.’

Two guardsmen clomped away. Demetrio still studied the body; Dionus, Arus and the remaining policemen watched Conan, who stood, sword in hand, like a bronze figure of brooding menace. Presently sandalled feet re-echoed outside, and the two guardsmen entered with a strongly built, dark-skinned man in the helmet and tunic of a charioteer, with a whip in his hand; and a small, timid-looking individual, typical of that class which, risen from the ranks of artisans, supplies right-hand men for wealthy merchants and traders.

This one recoiled with a cry from the sprawling bulk on the floor.

‘Oh, I knew evil would come of this!’

‘You are Promero, the clerk, I suppose. And you?’

‘Enaro, Kallian Publico’s charioteer.’

‘You do not seem overly moved at the sight of his corpse,’ observed Demetrio.

‘Why should I be moved?’ the dark eyes flashed. ‘Someone has only done what I dared not, but longed to do.’

‘So!’ murmured the Inquisitor. ‘Are you a free man?’

Enaro’s eyes were bitter as he drew aside his tunic, showing the brand of the debtor-slave on his shoulder.

‘Did you know your master was coming here tonight?’

‘No. I brought the chariot to the Temple this evening for him as usual. He entered it and I drove toward his villa. But before we came to the Palian Way, he ordered me to turn and drive him back. He seemed much agitated in his mind.’

‘And did you drive him back to the Temple?’

‘No. He bade me stop at Promero’s house. There he dismissed me, ordering me to return there for him shortly after midnight.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Shortly after dusk. The streets were almost deserted.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘I returned to the slave quarters where I remained until it was time to return to Promero’s house. I drove straight there, and your men seized me as I talked with Promero in his door.’

‘You have no idea why Kallian went to Promero’s house?’

‘He didn’t speak of his business to his slaves.’

Demetrio turned to Promero. ‘What do you know about this?’

‘Nothing.’ The clerk’s teeth chattered as he spoke.

‘Did Kallian Publico come to your house as the charioteer says?’

‘Yes.’

‘How long did he stay?’

‘Only a few minutes. Then he left.’

‘Did he come from your house to the Temple?’

‘I don’t know!’ The clerk’s voice was shrill with taut nerves.

‘Why did he come to your house?’

‘To—to talk matters of business with me.’

‘You’re lying,’ snapped Demetrio. ‘Why did he come to your house?’

‘I don’t know! I don’t know anything!’ Promero was growing hysterical. ‘I had nothing to do with it—’

‘Make him talk, Dionus,’ snapped Demetrio, and Dionus grunted and nodded to one of his men who, grinning savagely, moved toward the two captives.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he growled, thrusting his head forward and staring domineeringly at his shrinking prey.

‘You’re Posthumus,’ answered the charioteer sullenly. ‘You gouged out a girl’s eye in the Court of Justice because she wouldn’t give you information incriminating her lover.’

‘I always get what I go after!’ bellowed the guardsman, the veins in his thick neck swelling, and his face growing purple, as he seized the wretched clerk by the collar of his tunic, twisting it so the man was half strangled.

‘Speak up, you rat!’ he growled. ‘Answer the Inquisitor.’

‘Oh Mitra, mercy!’ screamed the wretch. ‘I swear that—’

Posthumus slapped him terrifically first on one side of the face and then on the other, and continued the interrogation by flinging him to the floor and kicking him with vicious accuracy.

‘Mercy!’ moaned the victim. ‘I’ll tell—I’ll tell anything—’

‘Then get up, you cur!’ roared Posthumus, swelling with self-importance. ‘Don’t lie there whining.’

Dionus cast a quick glance at Conan to see if he were properly impressed.

‘You see what happens to those who cross the police,’ he said.

The Cimmerian spat with a sneer of cruel contempt for the moaning clerk.

‘He’s a weakling and a fool,’ he growled. ‘Let one of you touch me and I’ll spill his guts on the floor.’

‘Are you ready to talk?’ asked Demetrio tiredly. He found these scenes wearisomely monotonous.

‘All I know,’ sobbed the clerk, dragging himself to his feet and whimpering like a beaten dog in his pain, ‘is that Kallian came to my house shortly after I arrived—I left the Temple at the same time he did—and sent his chariot away. He threatened me with discharge if I ever spoke of it. I am a poor man, without friends or favor. Without my position with him, I would starve.’

‘What’s that to me?’ snapped Demetrio. ‘How long did he remain at your house?’

‘Until perhaps half an hour before midnight. Then he left, saying that he was going to the Temple, and would return after he had done what he wished to do there.’

‘What was he going to do there?’

Promero hesitated at revealing the secrets of his dreaded employer, then a shuddering glance at Posthumus, who was grinning evilly as he doubled his huge fist, opened his lips quickly.

‘There was something in the Temple he wished to examine.’

‘But why should he come here alone in so much secrecy?’

‘Because it was not his property. It arrived in a caravan from the south, at dawn. The men of the caravan knew nothing of it, except that it had been placed with them by the men of a caravan from Stygia, and was meant for Kalanthes of Hanumar, priest of Ibis. The master of the caravan had been paid by these other men to deliver it directly to Kalanthes, but he’s a rascal by nature, and wished to proceed directly to Aquilonia, on the road to which Hanumar does not lie. So he asked if he might leave it in the Temple until Kalanthes could send for it.

‘Kallian agreed, and told him he himself would send a runner to inform Kalanthes. But after the men had gone, and I spoke of the runner, Kallian forbade me to send him. He sat brooding over what the men had left.’

‘And what was that?’

‘A sort of sarcophagus, such as is found in ancient Stygian tombs, but this one was round, like a covered metal bowl. Its composition was something like copper, but much harder, and it was carved with hieroglyphics, like those found on the more ancient menhirs in southern Stygia. The lid was made fast to the body by carven copper-like bands.’

‘What was in it?’

‘The men of the caravan did not know. They only said that the men who gave it to them told them that it was a priceless relic, found among the tombs far beneath the pyramids and sent to Kalanthes “because of the love the sender bore the priest of Ibis”. Kallian Publico believed that it contained the diadem of the giant-kings, of the people who dwelt in that dark land before the ancestors of the Stygians came there. He showed me a design carved on the lid, which he swore was the shape of the diadem which legend tells us the monster-kings wore.

‘He determined to open the Bowl and see what it contained.

‘He was like a madman when he thought of the fabled diadem, which myths say was set with the strange jewels known only to that ancient race, a single one of which is worth more than all the jewels of the modern world.

‘I warned him against it. But he stayed at my house as I have said, and a short time before midnight, he came along to the Temple, hiding in the shadows until the watchman had passed to the other side of the building, then letting himself in with his belt key. I watched him from the shadows of the silk shop, saw him enter the Temple, and then returned to my own house. If the diadem was in the Bowl, or anything else of great value, he intended

hiding it somewhere in the Temple and slipping out again. Then on the morrow he would raise a great hue and cry, saying that thieves had broken into his house and stolen Kalanthes's property. None would know of his prowlings but the charioteer and I, and neither of us would betray him.'

'But the watchman?' objected Demetrio.

'Kallian did not intend being seen by him; he planned to have him crucified as an accomplice of the thieves,' answered Promero. Arus gulped and turned pale as this duplicity of his employer came home to him.

'Where is this sarcophagus?' asked Demetrio. Promero pointed, and the Inquisitor grunted. 'So! The very room in which Kallian must have been attacked.'

Promero turned pale and twisted his thin hands.

'Why should a man in Stygia send Kalanthes a gift? Ancient gods and queer mummies have come up the caravan roads before, but who loves the priest of Ibis so well in Stygia, where they still worship the arch-demon Set who coils among the tombs in the darkness? The god Ibis has fought Set since the first dawn of the earth, and Kalanthes has fought Set's priests all his life. There is something dark and hidden here.'

'Show us this sarcophagus,' commanded Demetrio, and Promero hesitantly led the way. All followed, including Conan, who was apparently heedless of the wary eye the guardsmen kept on him, and seemed merely curious. They passed through the torn hangings and entered the room, which was rather more dimly lighted than the corridor. Doors on each side gave into other chambers, and the walls were lined with fantastic images, gods of strange lands and far peoples. And Promero cried out sharply.

'Look! The Bowl! It's open—and empty!'

In the center of the room stood a strange black cylinder, nearly four feet in height, and perhaps three feet in diameter at its widest circumference, which was halfway between the top and bottom. The heavy carved lid lay on the floor, and beside it a hammer and a chisel. Demetrio looked inside, puzzled an instant over the dim hieroglyphs, and turned to Conan.

'Is this what you came to steal?'

The barbarian shook his head.

'How could I bear it away? It is too big for one man to carry.'

‘The bands were cut with this chisel,’ mused Demetrio, ‘and in haste. There are marks where mis-strokes of the hammer dented the metal. We may assume that Kallian opened the Bowl. Someone was hiding nearby—possibly in the hangings in the doorway. When Kallian had the Bowl open, the murderer sprang on him—or he might have killed Kallian and opened the Bowl himself.’

‘This is a grisly thing,’ shuddered the clerk. ‘It’s too ancient to be holy. Who ever saw metal like it in a sane world? It seems less destructible than Aquilonian steel, yet see how it is corroded and eaten away in spots. Look at the bits of black mold clinging in the grooves of the hieroglyphics; they smell as earth smells from far below the surface. And look—here on the lid!’ The clerk pointed with a shaky finger. ‘What would you say it is?’

Demetrio bent closer to the carven design.

‘I’d say it represents a crown of some sort,’ he grunted.

‘No!’ exclaimed Promero. ‘I warned Kallian, but he would not believe me! It is a scaled serpent coiled with its tail in its mouth. It is the sign of Set, the Old Serpent, the god of the Stygians! This Bowl is too old for a human world—it is a relic of the time when Set walked the earth in the form of a man! The race which sprang from his loins laid the bones of their kings away in such cases as these, perhaps!’

‘And you’ll say that those moldering bones rose up and strangled Kallian Publico and then walked away, perhaps,’ derided Demetrio.

‘It was no man who was laid to rest in that bowl,’ whispered the clerk, his eyes wide and staring. ‘What human could lie in it?’

Demetrio swore disgustedly.

‘If Conan is not the murderer,’ he snapped, ‘the slayer is still somewhere in this building. Dionus and Arus, remain here with me, and you three prisoners stay here too. The rest of you search the building. The murderer could only have escaped if he got away before Arus found the body—by the way Conan used in entering, and in that case the barbarian would have seen him, if he’s telling the truth.’

‘I saw no one but this dog,’ growled Conan, indicating Arus.

‘Of course not, because you’re the murderer,’ said Dionus. ‘We’re wasting time, but we’ll search the building as a formality. And if we find no one, I promise you shall burn! Remember the law, my black-haired savage—you go to the mines for killing a commoner,

you hang for killing a tradesman, and for murdering a rich man, you burn!’

Conan answered with a wicked lift of his lip, baring his teeth, and the men began their search. The listeners in the chamber heard them stamping upstairs and down, moving objects, opening doors and bellowing to one another through the rooms.

‘Conan,’ said Demetrio, ‘you know what it means if they find no one?’

‘I didn’t kill him,’ snarled the Cimmerian. ‘If he had sought to hinder me I’d have split his skull. But I did not see him until I saw his corpse.’

‘I know that someone sent you here tonight, to steal at least,’ said Demetrio. ‘By your silence you incriminate yourself in this murder as well. You had best speak. The mere fact of your being here is sufficient to send you to the mines for ten years, anyhow, whether you admit your guilt or not. But if you tell the whole tale, you may save yourself from the stake.’

‘Well,’ answered the barbarian grudgingly, ‘I came here to steal the Zamorian diamond goblet. A man gave me a diagram of the Temple and told me where to look for it. It is kept in that room—’ Conan pointed—‘in a niche in the floor under a copper Shemitish god.’

‘He speaks truth there,’ said Promero. ‘I’d thought that not half a dozen men in the world knew the secret of that hiding place.’

‘And if you had secured it,’ asked Dionus sneeringly, ‘would you really have taken it to the man who hired you? Or would you have kept it for yourself?’

Again the smoldering eyes flashed resentment.

‘I am no dog,’ the barbarian muttered. ‘I keep my word.’

‘Who sent you here?’ Demetrio demanded, but Conan kept a sullen silence.

The guardsmen were straggling back from their search.

‘There’s no man hiding in this building,’ they growled. ‘We’ve ransacked the place. We found the trap-door in the roof through which the barbarian entered, and the bolt he cut in half. A man escaping that way would have been seen by the guards we posted about the building, unless he fled before we came. Then, besides, he would have had to stack tables or chairs or cases upon each other to reach it from below, and that has not been done. Why couldn’t he have gone out the front door just before Arus came around the building?’

‘Because the door was bolted on the inside, and the only keys which will work that bolt are

the one belonging to Arus and the one which still hangs on the girdle of Kallian Publico.'

'I've found the cable the murderer used,' one of them announced. 'A black cable, thicker than a man's arm, and curiously splotched.'

'Then where is it, fool?' exclaimed Dionus.

'In the chamber adjoining this one,' answered the guard. 'It's wrapped about a marble pillar, where no doubt the murderer thought it would be safe from detection. I couldn't reach it. But it must be the right one.'

He led the way into a room filled with marble statuary, and pointed to a tall column, one of several which served a purpose more of ornament to set off the statues, than of utility. And then he halted and stared.

'It's gone!' he cried.

'It never was there!' snorted Dionus.

'By Mitra, it was!' swore the guardsman. 'Coiled about the pillar just above those carven leaves. It's so shadowy up there near the ceiling I couldn't tell much about it—but it was there.'

'You're drunk,' snapped Demetrio, turning away. 'That's too high for a man to reach; and nothing but a snake could climb that smooth pillar.'

'A Cimmerian could,' muttered one of the men.

'Possibly. Say that Conan strangled Kallian, tied the cable about the pillar, crossed the corridor and hid in the room where the stair is. How then, could he have removed it after you saw it? He has been among us ever since Arus found the body. No, I tell you Conan didn't commit the murder. I believe the real murderer killed Kallian to secure whatever was in the Bowl, and is hiding now in some secret nook in the Temple. If we can't find him, we'll have to put the blame on the barbarian to satisfy justice, but—where is Promero?'

They had returned to the silent body in the corridor. Dionus bellowed threateningly for Promero, and the clerk came suddenly from the room in which stood the empty Bowl. He was shaking and his face was white.

'What now, man?' exclaimed Demetrio irritably.

'I found a symbol on the bottom of the Bowl!' chattered Promero. 'Not an ancient

hieroglyphic, but a symbol recently carved! The mark of Thoth-amon, the Stygian sorcerer, Kalanthes's deadly foe! He found it in some grisly cavern below the haunted pyramids! The gods of old times did not die, as men died—they fell into long sleeps and their worshippers locked them in sarcophagi so that no alien hand might break their slumbers. Thoth-amon sent death to Kalanthes—Kallian's greed caused him to loose the horror—and it is lurking somewhere near us—even now it may be creeping upon us—'

'You gibbering fool!' roared Dionus disgustedly, striking him heavily across the mouth. Dionus was a materialist, with scant patience for eery speculations.

'Well, Demetrio,' he said, turning to the Inquisitor, 'I see nothing else to do other than to arrest this barbarian—'

The Cimmerian cried out suddenly and they wheeled. He was glaring toward the door of a chamber that adjoined the room of statues.

'Look!' he exclaimed. 'I saw something move in that room—I saw it through the hangings. Something that crossed the floor like a long dark shadow!'

'Bah!' snorted Posthumo. 'We searched that room—'

'He saw something!' Promero's voice shrilled and cracked with hysterical excitement. 'This place is accursed! Something came out of the sarcophagus and killed Kallian Publico! It hid from you where no human could hide, and now it is in that room! Mitra defend us from the powers of Darkness! I tell you it was one of Set's children in that grisly Bowl!' He caught Dionus's sleeve with claw-like fingers. 'You must search that room again!'

The prefect shook him off disgustedly, and Posthumo was inspired to a flight of humor.

'You shall search it yourself, clerk!' he said, grasping Promero by neck and girdle, and propelling the screaming wretch forcibly toward the door, outside of which he paused and hurled him into the room so violently the clerk fell and lay half stunned.

'Enough of this,' growled Dionus, eyeing the silent Cimmerian. The prefect lifted his hand, Conan's eyes began to burn blue, and a tension crackled in the air, when an interruption came. A guardsman entered, dragging a slender, richly dressed figure.

'I saw him slinking about the back of the Temple,' quoth the guard, looking for commendation. Instead he received curses that lifted his hair.

'Release that gentleman, you bungling fool!' swore the prefect. 'Don't you know Aztrias Petanius, the nephew of the city's governor?'

The abashed guard fell away and the foppish young nobleman brushed his embroidered sleeve fastidiously.

‘Save your apologies, good Dionus,’ he lisped affectedly. ‘All in line of duty, I know. I was returning from a late revel and walking to rid my brain of the wine fumes. What have we here? By Mitra, is it murder?’

‘Murder it is, my lord,’ answered the prefect. ‘But we have a man who, though Demetrio seems to have doubts on the matter, will doubtless go to the stake for it.’

‘A vicious looking brute,’ murmured the young aristocrat. ‘How can any doubt his guilt? I have never seen such a villainous countenance before.’

‘Yes, you have, you scented dog,’ snarled the Cimmerian, ‘when you hired me to steal the Zamorian goblet for you. Revels, eh? Bah! You were waiting in the shadows for me to hand you the goblet. I would not have revealed your name if you had given me fair words. Now tell these dogs that you saw me climb the wall after the watchman made the last round, so that they’ll know I didn’t have time to kill this fat swine before Arus entered and found the body.’

Demetrio looked quickly at Aztrias, who did not change color.

‘If what he says is true, my lord,’ said the Inquisitor, ‘it clears him of the murder, and we can easily hush up the matter of attempted theft. He is due ten years at hard labor for housebreaking, but if you say the word, we’ll arrange for him to escape and none but us will ever know anything about it. I understand—you wouldn’t be the first young nobleman who had to resort to such things to pay gambling debts and the like. You can rely on our discretion.’

Conan looked at the young nobleman expectantly, but Aztrias shrugged his slender shoulders and covered a yawn with a delicate white hand.

‘I know him not,’ he answered. ‘He is mad to say I hired him. Let him take his just desserts. He has a strong back and the toil in the mines will be well for him.’

Conan’s eyes blazed and he started as if stung; the guards tensed, grasping their bills, then relaxed as he dropped his head suddenly, as if in sullen resignation, and not even Demetrio could tell that he was watching them from under his heavy black brows, with eyes that were slits of blue bale-fire.

He struck with no more warning than a striking cobra; his sword flashed in the candlelight.

Aztrias shrieked and his head flew from his shoulders in a shower of blood, the features frozen in a white mask of horror. Cat-like, Conan wheeled and thrust murderously for Demetrio's groin. The Inquisitor's instinctive recoil barely deflected the point which sank into his thigh, glanced from the bone and ploughed out through the outer side of the leg. Demetrio went to his knee with a groan, unnerved and nauseated with agony.

Conan had not paused. The bill which Dionus flung up saved the prefect's skull from the whistling blade which turned slightly as it cut through the shaft, and sheared his ear cleanly from his head. The blinding speed of the barbarian paralyzed the senses of the police and made their actions futile gestures. Caught flatfooted and dazed by his quickness and ferocity, half of them would have been down before they had a chance to fight back, except that Posthumus, more by luck than skill, threw his arms about the Cimmerian, pinioning his sword-arm. Conan's left hand leaped to the guard's head, and Posthumus fell away and writhed shrieking on the floor, clutching a gaping red socket where an eye had been.

Conan bounded back from the waving bills and his leap carried him outside the ring of his foes, to where Arus stood fumbling at his crossbow. A savage kick in the belly dropped him, green-faced and gagging, and Conan's sandalled heel crunched square in the watchman's mouth. The wretch screamed through a ruin of splintered teeth, blowing bloody froth from his mangled lips.

Then all were frozen in their tracks by the soul-shaking horror of a scream which rose from the chamber into which Posthumus had hurled Promero, and from the velvet-hung door the clerk came reeling, and stood there, shaking with great silent sobs, tears running down his pasty face and dripping off his loose sagging lips, like an idiot-babe weeping.

All halted to stare at him aghast—Conan with his dripping sword, the police with their lifted bills, Demetrio crouching on the floor and striving to staunch the blood that jetted from the great gash in his thigh, Dionus clutching the bleeding stump of his severed ear, Arus weeping and spitting out fragments of broken teeth—even Posthumus ceased his howls and blinked whimpering through the bloody mist that veiled his half-sight.

Promero came reeling out into the corridor and fell stiffly before them. Screeching in an unbearable high-pitched laughter of madness, he cried shrilly, 'The god has a long neck! Ha! ha! ha! Oh, a long, a cursed long neck!' And then with a frightful convulsion he stiffened and lay grinning vacantly at the shadowy ceiling.

'He's dead!' whispered Dionus, awedly, forgetting his own hurt, and the barbarian who stood with his dripping sword so near him. He bent over the body, then straightened, his eyes flaring. 'He's not wounded—in Mitra's name what is in that chamber?'

Then horror swept over them and they ran screaming for the outer door, jammed there in a

clawing shrieking mob, and burst through like madmen. Arus followed and the half-blind Posthumus struggled up and blundered blindly after his fellows, squealing like a wounded pig and begging them not to leave him behind. He fell among them and they knocked him down and trampled him, screaming in their fear. But he crawled after them, and after him came Demetrio. The Inquisitor had the courage to face the unknown, but he was unnerved and wounded, and the sword that had struck him down was still near him. Grasping his blood-spurting thigh, he limped after his companions. Police, charioteer and watchman, wounded or whole, they burst screaming into the street, where the men watching the building took panic and joined in the flight, not waiting to ask why. Conan stood in the great corridor alone, save for the corpses on the floor.

The barbarian shifted his grip on his sword and strode into the chamber. It was hung with rich silken tapestries; silken cushions and couches lay strewn about in careless profusion; and over a heavy gilded screen a face looked at the Cimmerian.

Conan stared in wonder at the cold classic beauty of that countenance, whose like he had never seen among the sons of men. Neither weakness nor mercy nor cruelty nor kindness, nor any other human emotion was in those features. They might have been the marble mask of a god, carved by a master hand, except for the unmistakable life in them—life cold and strange, such as the Cimmerian had never known and could not understand. He thought fleetingly of the marble perfection of the body which the screen concealed—it must be perfect, he thought, since the face was so inhumanly beautiful. But he could see only the god-like face, the finely molded head which swayed curiously from side to side. The full lips opened and spoke a single word in a rich vibrant tone that was like the golden chimes that ring in the jungle-lost temples of Khitai. It was an unknown tongue, forgotten before the kingdoms of man arose, but Conan knew that it meant, ‘Come!’

And the Cimmerian came, with a desperate leap and a humming slash of his sword. The beautiful head rolled from the top of the screen in a jet of dark blood and fell at his feet, and he gave back, fearing to touch it. Then his skin crawled, for the screen shook and heaved with the convulsions of something behind. Conan had seen and heard men die by the scores, and never had he heard a human being make such sounds in the death-throes. There was a thrashing, floundering noise, as if a great cable were being lashed violently about.

At last the movements ceased and Conan looked gingerly behind the screen. Then the full horror of it all rushed over the Cimmerian, and he fled, nor did he slacken his headlong flight until the spires of Numalia faded into the dawn behind him. The thought of Set was like a nightmare, and the children of Set who once ruled the earth and who now sleep in their nighted caverns far below the black pyramids. Behind that gilded screen there had been no human body—only the shimmering, headless coils of a gigantic serpent.

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