

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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# THE GOD IN THE BOWL

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD  
EDITED BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

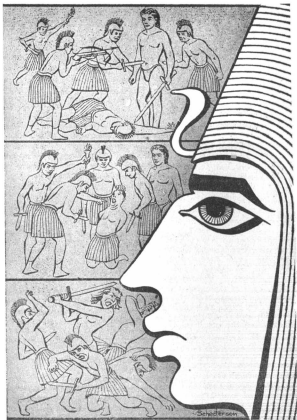
With the death of Robert E. Howard in 1936 the world lost one of its greatest fantasy adventure writers. Howard had created a world in the remote past where grim and mighty heroes fought against the horrors of wizardry and the strange beasts and gods left over from a still more savage earlier age. It was a rich and complete world, and the heroes were of epic mold. Of these, the greatest was Conan the Cimmerian, who came from the chill Northland to steal and plunder and fight his way up to the throne of one of the greatest of the semi-civilized empires of the time. Perhaps it is outright fantasy, since science says no such world existed; or perhaps, if you'll imagine this on some world of the future where conditions are different from those on Earth, it's as truly science-fiction as many stories are. In either case, **SPACE SCIENCE FICTION** feels the discovery of a hitherto-unpublished story of Howard's Hyperborean hero, Conan the Cimmerian, is an important event. We are happy to bring it to you as our first **SPACE Special**

Illustrated by SCHLECTERSON

*NOTE: This is one of the Conan stories that I have dug out of the pile of unsold manuscripts that Robert E. Howard left in the hands of his agent, the late Otis A. Kling, at his lamented death in 1936. The story, like The Tower of the Elephant and Rogues in the House, deals with Conan's larcenous youth. While there is no exact indication of when the tale was written, a holographic note from H. P. Lovecraft (to whom Howard had evidently submitted the story for comment) was clipped to the*

*manuscript. The note was written on the back of a calendar-pad bearing the date "July 1, 1931", from which I judge that this was among the first Conan stories to be composed. The note reads:*

Wandrei and I have read these tales with keen interest & appreciation. Best wishes for their ultimate publication! Dwyer seems to have enjoyed them greatly, too. The climax of "The God in the Bowl" is splendidly vivid!  
—HPL



*In reworking this tale I have retained the original storyline without change. My alterations comprise: (1) Changing the names of characters where these names too closely resembled each other or those of other characters in the Conan series. (Howard was incorrigibly careless in such matters.) (2) Condensing the dialogue which, especially in the early part of the story, got out of hand. (3) Correcting many minor infelicities and modifying the style, which in places approached that of a contemporary whodunnit, for greater consistency with the other Conan stories.*

—L. S. de C.

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

The watchman looked sharply up and down the vast corridor lighted by huge candles set in niches along the walls. Between the niches these walls were covered with black velvet wall-hangings and, between these, hanging shields and crossed weapons of fantastic make were affixed to the walls behind. Here and

there, too, stood figures of curious gods—images carven of stone or rare woods, or cast in bronze, iron, or silver—dimly mirrored in the gleaming black floor.

Orys, a simple man, shuddered. Though he had worked here for some months he had never yet become used to the fantastic establishment. Men called this great museum and antique-house, harboring rarities from all over the world, Kallian Podarco's Temple—and now, in the midnight silence, Orys stood in the great hall and stared at the sprawling corpse of the Temple's rich and powerful owner.

Kallian's appearance was now strangely different from what it had been when he rode along the Pallian Way in his gilded chariot, massive, arrogant, and domineering, with his dark eyes glinting with magnetic vitality. Men who had hated and feared Kallian Podarco would scarcely have recognized him 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 started from his head, and his tongue lolled from his gaping mouth. His fat hands, glittering with rings, were thrown out as in a futile gesture.

"Why took they not his

rings?" muttered the watchman uneasily. Then he started and glared, the short hairs prickling at the nape of his neck. Through the dark hangings that masked one of the many doorways came a figure.

Orys saw a tall, powerfully-built youth, naked but for a loincloth and sandals strapped high about his ankles, with a skin burned brown as by the sun of the wastelands and blue eyes smoldering from under a mop of disorderly black hair. A long sword in a leather scabbard hung from his girdle.

Orys ran his eyes nervously over the broad shoulders, massive chest, and heavy arms. His skin crawled as a single look at the broad-browed features told him that the man was no Nemedian. He fingered his crossbow, half minded to drive a bolt through the stranger's body without parley, yet fearful of what might happen if he failed to kill with the first shot.

The stranger looked, more in curiosity than surprise, at the body on the floor. Orys drew a deep breath and asked, "Why killed you him?"

The other shook his touselled head. "I slew him not," he answered, speaking Nemedian with a barbarous accent. "Who is he?"

"Kallian Podarco," replied Orys, edging back.

A flicker of interest showed in the moody blue eyes. "The proprietor?"

"Aye." Orys had edged his way to the wall. Now he grasped a thick velvet rope that hung there and jerked it violently.

From the street outside sounded the piercing clang of the bell that hung before all shops and other establishments to summon the watch. The stranger started.

"Why did you that?" he asked. "It will fetch the watchman!"

"I am the watchman, knave!" answered Orys, bracing his courage. "Stand where you are. Move not or I'll loose a bolt through you!"

His finger touched the trigger of his arbalest; the wicked square head of the quarrel pointed straight for the other's broad breast. The stranger scowled, his dark face lowering. He showed no fear, but seemed hesitant whether to obey the command or chance a sudden break. Orys licked his lips, his blood running cold as he saw caution struggle with lethal intent in the foreigner's features.

Then he heard a door crash open and a babble of voices. As half a dozen men entered the hall he drew a breath of grateful amazement, while the stranger

tensed and glared with the worried look of a beast of prey interrupted in its hunt by a larger one. All but one of the newcomers wore the scarlet tunic of the prefectural guard of the city of Numalia. They were girt with short stabbing swords and carried bills—long-shafted weapons, half pike, half ax.

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

"Thank Mitra, Lord Hymetrio!" cried Orys. "Fortune is assuredly with me tonight. I had no hope that the watch would answer the summons so swiftly—or that you would be among them!"

"I was making the rounds with Diomus," answered Hymetrio. "We were but passing the temple when the watch-bell clanged. But who is this? *Ishtar!* The master of the Temple himself!"

"None other," said Orys, "and foully murdered. It is my duty, you know, to walk about the building all night, because of the immense wealth stored here. Kallian Podarco had rich patrons—scholars, princes, and wealthy collectors. Well, but a few minutes ago I tried the door that opens on the portico and found it only bolted, not locked. The

door has a bolt, which works from either side, and also a great lock, which can be worked only from without. Only Kallian Podarco had a key to that, the very key that now hangs from his girdle.

"I knew something was amiss, for Kallian always locked the door with the great lock when he closed the Temple, and I had not seen him return since he left at close of day for his villa in the suburbs. With my key to the bolt I entered and found the body lying as you see it."

"So." Hymetrio's keen eyes swept the stranger. "And who is this?"

"Why, the murderer!" cried Orys. "He came through yonder door—some sort of northern barbarian, perhaps a Hyperborean."

Hymetrio asked the stranger, "Who are you?"

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"Did you slay this man?"

The Cimmerian shook his head.

"Answer me!" snapped the questioner.

An angry look rose in the blue eyes. "I am no dog, to be spoken to thus!"

"Oh! An impudent knave!" declared Hymetrio's companion, a big man wearing the silver fillet and gilded cuirass of the

municipal prefect. "An independent cur! I'll soon knock the insolence out of him. You, rogue, speak up! Why slew you—"

"A moment, Diomua," commanded Hymetrio, then turned to Conan. "Fellow, I am the president of the Inquisitorial Council of the city of Numalia. It is our boast that with us the innocent have naught to fear, the guilty naught to hope for. Therefore you had best tell why you are here, and if you are not the murderer, prove it."

The Cimmerian hesitated. His bearing showed no fear, but rather a slight bewilderment, as if baffled by the mysterious complexities of civilized urban life.

"While he thinks it over," said Hymetrio, turning to Orya, "tell me: Saw you Kallian Poldarco leave the Temple this evening?"

"No, my lord, but he is usually gone when I come to begin my sentry-duty. The great door was bolted and locked."

"Could he, have entered the building again without your seeing him?"

"Mayhap; but I should have heard the wheels of his chariot on the cobbles. And the door was locked on the outside—I try them all from time to time through the night—until perhaps half an hour gone, when I found it unlocked."

"You heard no cry or sound of struggle?"

"No, sir. But that's not strange, for the walls of the Temple are so thick that no sound can pass them."

The burly prefect interrupted the dialogue to complain, "Why all this labor of questions and speculations? There stands our man; let me but take him to the Courts of Justice and I'll warrant you to wring a confession of his crime from him if I must beat his every bone of him to powder!"

Hymetrio looked at the barbarian. "You heard the prefect. What have you to say?"

"That any man who touches me shall soon be greeting his ancestors in Hell," grated the Cimmerian, showing his powerful teeth.

"Why then came you here, if not to slay?"

"I came to steal."

"To steal what?"

Conan hesitated. "Food."

"You lie!" barked the inquisitor. "You knew there was no food here. Tell the truth or—"

The Cimmerian laid his hand on his sword-hilt, a gesture as fraught with menace as the baring of a tiger's fangs. "Save your bullying for the cowards who fear you. I'm no city-bred Nemedian to cringe before your

hired dogs. I have slain better men than you for less."

Diomus, who had opened his mouth as if to bellow an order, closed it again. The watchmen fidgeted with their bills, glancing at Hymetrio, and speechless at hearing the all-powerful police thus defied. Orya glanced from one to the other, wondering what was going on in the keen brain behind Hymetrio's hawk-face. Among the Numalians the inquisitor bore the repute of a just if merciless judge. Perhaps the magistrate feared to arouse the barbaric frenzy of the Cimmerian, or perhaps there was an honest doubt in his mind.

He spoke. "I have not accused you of slaying Kallian, but you must admit that appearances are against you. How came you into the Temple?"

Conan answered grudgingly. "I hid in the shadows of the warehouse behind this building. When this dog," he jerked a thumb at Orya, "passed around the corner, I ran to the wall and scaled it—"

"A lie!" broke in Orya. "No man could climb that straight wall!"

"Have you never seen a Cimmerian scale a sheer cliff?" said Hymetrio. "I am conducting this inquiry. Go on, Conan."

"The wall was easy to climb, being decorated with carvings,"

continued the Cimmerian. "I gained the roof and found the trap-door to be fastened with an iron bolt that passed through it and was locked within. I hewed the bolt in twain—"

Orya, remembering the thickness of the bolt, gasped and moved back from the barbarian, who scowled abstractedly at him and continued, "I passed through the trap-door into an upper chamber, and thence came to the stair—"

"How knew you where the stair was? Only trusted servants and patrons of Kallian were allowed in the upper rooms."

Conan stared in stubborn silence until Hymetrio said, "Well, what did you then?"

"As I came straight down into the chamber beyond yonder curtained door, I heard the opening of another portal. When I looked through the hangings I saw this loon standing over the corpse."

"Why did you come from your hiding-place?"

"Because at first I deemed him another thief, come to steal that which—" The Cimmerian checked himself.

"—That which you yourself had come after!" finished Hymetrio with a smile of cold satisfaction. "As you did not tarry above, where the richest goods



are, you must have been sent by some one who knows the Temple well, to steal some special thing!"

"Or to slay Kallian!" cried Diomus. "Seize him, men! I'll have a confession—"

With a foreign curse Conan leaped back and whipped out his sword with a viciousness that made the blade hum.

"Back, if you value your lives!" he snarled. "Because you dare torture shop-keepers and harlots, think not to lay your fat paws on a hillman! Fumble with your bow, watchman, and I'll burst your guts with my heel!"

"Wait!" said Hymetrio. "Call off your dogs, Diomus. I am still not convinced that this is the slayer." Hymetrio leaped toward Diomus and whispered something that Orys could not catch, but which he suspected of being a plan for tricking Conan into parting with his sword. He saw that Conan noticed the interchange, too.

Diomus called his guardsmen back and Hymetrio said to Conan, "Give me your sword, as a surety that you will not attack us."

"Take it if you can!"

The Inquisitor shrugged. "Very well, but make no attempt to escape. Men with crossbows guard the house outside." He turned to the corpse. "Strange.

Why strangle him when a sword-stroke is quicker and surer?" He felt the body with experienced hands. "Dead at least the half of an hour. If Conan speaks truth he could hardly have slain the man ere Orys entered." He brooded over the dead man's throat, which had been crushed to a pulp of purplish flesh. The head sagged on splintered vertebrae. "And what terrible force could so have crushed his neck? One would think he had been throttled by one of the great man-apes of the eastern mountains."

Hymetrio rose and walked to the nearest door into the corridor. "Here is a bust knocked from its stand, and the floor is scratched, and the hangings are pulled awry. Perhaps the attack upon Kallian began in this room. We shall look into it—"

Chariot-wheels rattled in the street, then stopped.

"Diomus!" snapped the magistrate. "Send two men to fetch the driver of that chariot."

"Sir," said Orys, who was familiar with the local street-noises, "from the sound I should say that it stopped before Promero's house, beyond the silk-merchant's shop."

"Who is Promero?"

"Kallian Podarco's chief clerk."

"Fetch him with the driver," said Hymetrio.

Two guardamen clomped away. Hymetrio resumed his study of the body. Diomus, Orya, and the remaining policemen watched Conan, who stood sword in hand like a bronze statue of brooding menace. Presently sandals slapped and the two guards reentered with a strong dark man in the leather helmet and long tunic of a charioteer, carrying a whip, and a small rabbit-looking person typical of that class which, risen from the ranks of artisans, supplies right-hand men for rich merchants and traders. The small man recoiled with a cry from the bulk on the floor.

"Oh, I knew evil would come of this!" he wailed.

Hymetrio said, "You are Promero, I suppose. And you?"

"Enaros," said the other newcomer. "Kallian Podarco's charioteer."

Hymetrio observed, "You seem not overly moved at the sight of your master's corpse."

The dark eyes flashed. "Why should I be? Some one has but done that which I and many of his servants long wished to do but dared not."

"Did you know your master was coming here tonight?"

"Nay. I brought the chariot to the Temple this evening as

usual. He entered and I drove towards his villa, but ere we reached the Palian Way he ordered me to turn back, seeming much agitated."

"Back to the Temple?"

"No, to Promero's house, where he dismissed me, commanding me to return for him shortly after midnight."

"What did you then?"

"I returned to the slave quarters until it was time to fetch him. Then I drove straight here, where your men seized me."

"Know you why Kallian visited Promero?"

"He spoke not of his business to his slaves."

Hymetrio turned to Promero. "What know you of this?"

"Naught." The clerk's teeth chattered as he spoke.

"Did Kallian come to your house as the charioteer avers?"

"Aye, sir."

"Why?"

"I know not! I know nothing!" Promero's voice became hysterical.

"Make him talk, Diomus," said Hymetrio. Diomus nodded to one of his men who, grinning savagely, moved toward the two captives. He thrust his head forward, growling. "D'you know me?"

The charioteer answered sullenly. "You're Bostoumo, who

gouged out a girl's eye in the Court of Justice when she would not incriminate her lover."

The guardsman's face purpled and the veins in his thick neck swelled as he seized the clerk by the collar of his tunic and twisted it until the man was half strangled. He bellowed, "Speak up, rat! Answer the inquisitor!"

"Oh, Mitra, mercy!" screamed the wretch. "I swear—"

Bostoumo gave him a terrific slap on each side of the face, then flung him to the floor and kicked him with vicious accuracy.

"Mercy!" moaned the victim. "I'll tell—I'll tell all—"

"Get up, cur!" roared Bostoumo.

Diomus shot a glance at Conan to see if he were properly impressed. The Cimmerian merely spat contemptuously. The clerk dragged himself to his feet, whimpering.

"Kallian came to my house soon after I arrived—I left the Temple when he did—and sent his chariot away. He threatened me with dismissal if I ever spoke of it. I'm a poor man, my lords, without friends or favor. Without my position with him I shall starve."

"What is that to me?" snapped Hymetrico. "How long remained he with you?"

"Until perhaps half an hour

before midnight. Then he went, saying that he was going to the Temple, and would return later."

"What did he mean to do there?"

Promero hesitated, but a shuddering glance at the grinning Bostoumo flexing his huge flat soon opened his lips. "He wished to examine something in the Temple."

"Why alone, and in secret?"

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

"Kallian assented and told him that he himself would send a servant to inform Caranthes. 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 like copper, but harder, and it was carved with hieroglyphs like those on ancient menhirs in southern Stygia. The lid was made fast by copper-like bands."

"What was in it?"

"The caravan-men did not know. They said only that those who gave it to them told them that it was a priceless relic found among the tombs far beneath the pyramids and sent to Caranthes because of the love which the sender bore the priest of Ibis. Kallian Podarco 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 upon the lid, which he swore had the shape of the diadem which legend tells the monster-kings wore.

"He was determined to open the bowl to see what it contained. He became like one mad when he thought of the fabled diadem, set with many strange jewels known only to that ancient race, a single one of which would be worth more than all the jewels of the modern world.

"I warned him against it; but shortly before midnight he went 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 until he entered, then returned to my own house. If anything of great value were in the bowl he intended hiding it elsewhere in the Temple and slipping out again. Then on the morrow he would raise a great outcry, saying that thieves had broken into his house and stolen Caranthes' property. None should know of his prowlings but the charioteer and I, and neither of us would speak."

"But the watchman?" objected Hymetrio.

"Kallian did not intend to be seen by him. He planned to have him crucified as an accomplice of the thieves."

Orys gulped as his employer's duplicity penetrated his simple mind.

"Where is this sarcophagus?" asked Hymetrio. Promero pointed, and the inquisitor grunted. "So! The very room where Kallian was attacked."

Promero twisted his thin trembling hands. "Why should a Stygian send Caranthes 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, the snake-god who coils among the tombs in the darkness? The god Ibis has fought Set since the dawn of the earth, and Caranthes has fought Set's priests all his life. Something dark is hidden here."

Hymetrio said: "Show us this scrocephagus."

Hesitantly, Promero led the way. All followed, including Conan, apparently heedless of the guardsmen's wary glances. They passed through the torn hangings into a dimly-lit room whose walls were lined with fantastic images, gods of strange lands and far peoples. Promero cried out:

"Look! The bowl! Open, and empty!"

In the center of the room stood a bulging black cylindrical vessel, about four feet high and a little less in maximum diameter. The heavy carven lid lay on the floor, and beside it a hammer and chisel. Hymetrio looked inside, puzzled an instant over the dim hieroglyphs, and turned to Conan, saying:

"Is this what you came to steal?"

The barbarian shook his head. "How could one man bear it away?"

"The bands were cut with this chisel," mused Hymetrio. "And in haste: there are marks where

mistrokes of the hammer dented the metal. No doubt Kallian opened the bowl, and then the murderer sprang out of hiding upon him."

"A grisly thing," shuddered the clerk. "Too ancient to be holy. Look at that metal: harder than Aquilonian steel, yet corroded away in spots. And there on the lid!"

Hymetrio bent closer to the carven design. "I should say it depicted a crown of some sort."

"No! I warned Kallian, but he would not believe me. It is the scaled serpent coiled with its tail in its mouth—the sign of Set, the Old Serpent, the god of the Stygians! The bowl is a relic of a time when Set walked the earth in the form of a man. Perhaps the race that sprang from his loins laid the bones of their kings away in such cases as this!"

"And so these moldering bones rose up, strangled Kallian Podarco, and walked away?"

"What man could lie in that bowl?" whispered the clerk, eyes wide.

Hymetrio swore. "A man could sit in it, were he doubled up as the Picts do with their dead for burial. If Conan be not the culprit, the slayer is still about. Diomus and Orys and you three prisoners, remain here while the rest of you search the

house. The murderer could only have escaped by the way Conan came in, in which case the barbarian would have seen him."

"I saw no one but this dog," growled Conan, indicating Orya.

"Of course not, because you're the guilty one," said Diomus. "We shall search, but we shall find nobody. And remember the law, my black-haired savage: For slaying an artisan you go to the mines; a tradesman, you hang; a gentleman, you burn!"

Conan bared his teeth for answer. The men began their search; the listeners in the chamber heard them stamping about, moving objects, opening doors, and calling to one another.

"Conan," said Hymetrio, "you know what happens if they find no one."

"I slew him not," snarled the Cimmerian. "If he had sought to hinder me I should have split his skull, but I saw him not until I sighted his corpse."

"Someone sent you here to steal, at least, and by your silence you incriminate yourself in this manslaying as well. Your being here alone is enough to send you to the mines, 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 diamond Zamorian gob-

let. It is kept in yonder room, in a niche in the floor under a copper Shemitish god."

"He speaks truth there," said Promero. "I thought not six men knew of that hiding place."

Hymetrio smiled coldly. "And if you had secured it, would you have really given it to him who hired you?"

"I keep my word."

"Who sent you hither?" asked Hymetrio, but Conan went into a sullen silence.

The guards straggled back. "There's no man hiding in this house," they said. "We have ransacked the place. We found the trap-door with the bolt hewn in half, through which the barbarian came. A man escaping that way would have been seen by our guards, and he would have had to stack furniture to reach it from below, which has not been done."

Another said, "I think I saw the rope used by the strangler."

"Where, fool?" cried Diomus quickly.

"In the chamber adjoining this one: a thick black cable hanging down from the carven top of a marble pillar. I couldn't reach it."

He led the way into a room filled with marble statuary and pointed to a tall column, then halted staring. "It's gone!"

"It was never there," snorted Diomus.

"By Mitra, it was! Coiled about the pillar above those carven leaves."

"Too high for a man to reach," said Hymetrio.

"A man-ape from the eastern mountains could, sir," said the man. "Or a Cimmerian; there's little difference."

"Possibly. But Conan has been under my sight all the time and so could not have removed this rope since you saw it. I am convinced that he is not the slayer, who is still hiding in some nook hereabouts. If we cannot find him we shall have to blame the barbarian, to satisfy justice, but—where's Promero?"

They had straggled back to the silent body in the corridor. Diomus bellowed for Promero, who came from the room in which stood the empty bowl, face white and hands shaking.

"What now, man?" said Hymetrio.

Promero chattered, "I have found a symbol on the bottom of the bowl; no ancient hieroglyphic, but freshly carved! The mark of Thoth-Amon, the Stygian sorcerer, Caranthes' deadly foe! He must have found the bowl in some grisly cavern below the haunted pyramids! The gods of old times did not die as men

die—they fell into long slumbers and their worshippers locked them in sarcophagi that no alien hand might waken them! Thoth-Amon sent death to Caranthes—Kallian's greed led him to loose this horror—and it is lurking near us—it is creeping upon us—"

"Gibbering fool!" roared Diomus, striking Promero heavily across the mouth. "Well, Hymetrio, unless you believe this superstitious nonsense, I see naught for it but to arrest this barbarian—"

The Cimmerian cried out, glaring toward the door of the chamber adjoining the room of statues. "Look! I saw something move in that room—something that crossed the floor like a dark shadow."

"Bah!" said Bostoumo, the huge guardsman. "We have searched that room—"

"He saw something!" Promero's voice was shrill with excitement. "This place is accursed! Something came out of the sarcophagus and slew Kallian Podarco! It hid where no man could hide, and now it lurks in that chamber! Mitra defend us from the powers of darkness!" He caught Diomus' sleeve. "Search that room again, my lord!"

"You shall search it yourself, clerk!" said Bostoumo as the

prefect shook off the clerk's frenzied grip. The prefectural guard grasped Promero by neck and girdle, pushed the screaming wretch before him to the entrance of the room in question, and hurled him so violently across the threshold that he fell and lay half stunned.

"Enough," said Diomus, eyeing the silent Cimmerian. The prefect lifted his hand and tension crackled in the air when an interruption occurred. A guardsman dragged in a slender richly-dressed figure, explaining, with the pleased look of one who expects praise for a worthy act, "I saw him slinking about the back of the Temple."

Instead of praise the man received curses that lifted his hair. "Release that gentleman!" shouted Diomus. "Know you not Astrias Petanius, nephew of the governor?"

The abashed guard fell away, trying to make himself look inconspicuous, while the young fop fastidiously brushed his sleeve. "Save your apologies, good Diomus," he lisped. "All in line of duty, I know. I was walking home from a late revel to rid my brain of the fumes. What have we here? Ishtar, is it murder?"

"Murder it is, my lord," said the prefect. "But we have a suspect who, though Hymetrio

seems to have doubts on the matter, will go to the stake for it."

"A vicious-looking brute," murmured the young aristocrat. "How can any doubt his guilt? Never before have I seen so villainous a countenance."

"Oh, yes, you have, you scented cockroach," snarled the Cimmerian, "when you hired me to steal the goblet for you. Revels, eh? Bah! You were waiting for me to hand you the loot. I should not have revealed your name had you given me fair words, but now tell these dogs that you saw me climb the wall after the watchman made his last round, so that they shall know I had no time to kill this fat swine before Orys found the body."

Hymetrio looked quickly at Astrias. "If he speaks truth, my lord, it clears him of the murder, and we can easily hush up the other matter. The Cimmerian merits ten years in the mines for housebreaking, but we cannot so deal with him and expect him to keep silence. Nor would justice be served by a great scandal, especially as the theft was not consummated and as the victim no longer lives to complain. If you say the word, we'll arrange for this fellow to escape and none but us shall ever know about it—not your uncle or anybody. I understand—you would



not be the first gentleman to resort to desperate means to pay debts—but you can rely on our discretion.”

Conan looked at the nobleman expectantly, but Atrias shrugged his slender shoulders and covered a yawn with a delicate white hand. “I know him not; he’s mad to say I hired him. Let him take his deserts; he has a strong back for bearing ore in the mines.”

Conan, eyes blazing, started as if stung. The guards tightened their grasp on their bills. Then they relaxed as Conan dropped his head and let his shoulders sag as if in sullen resignation. Orys could not tell whether he was watching them from under his heavy black brows or not.

The Cimmerian struck with no more warning than a cobra. His sword flashed in the candlelight. Atrias began a shriek that ended sharply as his head flew from his shoulders in a shower of blood, the features frozen into a white mask of horror.

Hymetrio, with more courage than sense, drew a dagger from his tunic and stepped forward for a stab. Catlike, Conan wheeled and thrust murderously for the inquisitor’s groin. Hymetrio’s instinctive recoil only partly avoided the point, which sank into his thigh, glanced from the bone, and plowed free

through the outer side of the leg. Hymetrio sank to one knee with a groan of agony.

Conan did not pause. The bill that Diomus flung up saved the prefect’s skull from the whistling blade which, turned slightly as it cut through the shaft, glanced from the side of his head and sheared off his right ear. The blinding speed of the barbarian paralyzed the police. Half of them would have been down before they had a chance to fight back except that the burly Bostoumo, more by luck than by skill, threw his arms around the Cimmerian, pinioning his sword-arm. But Conan’s left hand leaped to the guard’s head and Bostoumo fell away shrieking, clutching a gaping red socket where an eye had been.

Conan bounded back from the waving bills. His leap carried him outside the circle of his foes to where Orys had bent over to re-cock his crossbow. A savage kick in the face dropped him, screaming through a ruin of splintered teeth and 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 Bostoumo had hurled Promero. From the velvet-hung door the clerk

came reeling and stood, shaking with great silent sobs, tears running down his pasty face and dripping from his sagging chin, like an idiot-babe weeping.

All halted to stare—Conan with his dripping sword, the guards with their lifted bills, Hymetrio crouching and striving to staunch the blood from his wound, Diomus clutching the bleeding stump of his severed ear, Orys weeping and spitting out a couple of broken teeth. Even Bostoumo ceased his howls and blinked with his good eye.

Promero reeled into the corridor and fell stiffly before them, screeching amid the high-pitched laughter of madness. "The god has a long reach! Ha-ha-ha! Oh, a cursed long reach!"

Then with a frightful convulsion he stiffened and lay grinning vacantly at the shadowy ceiling.

"He's dead!" whispered Diomus, bending over him and for the moment ignoring his own hurt and the dripping sword that had inflicted it. The prefect straightened up, his piggish eyes popping. "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. The guards, dropping their bills, jammed into it in a clawing and shrieking mob

and burst through like madmen. Orys followed the unwounded guards, and the half-blind Bostoumo blundered after his fellows, squealing like a wounded pig and begging them not to leave him behind. He fell among the rearmost and they knocked him down and trampled him, screaming in their fear. He crawled after them, and after him came Hymetrio, limping along and holding his wounded thigh. Police, charioteer, watchman, and officials, wounded or whole, burst shrieking into the street, where the men watching the house took panic and joined in the flight, not waiting to ask why.

Conan stood in the great corridor alone save for the three corpses. Atrias' disembodied head and Bostoumo's gouged-out eye seemed to stare accusingly up at him from 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 screen of gilded brass a Face looked at the Cimmerian.

Conan stared in wonder at the cold, perfect 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 showed 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, beyond the Cimmerian's knowledge or understanding. The concealed body must, he thought, possess a marble perfection to match the inhumanly beautiful face.

The finely-molded head swayed; the full lips opened and spoke a word, in a rich vibrant tone like the golden chimes that ring in the jungle-lost temples of Khitai. The word was in an unknown tongue, forgotten before the kingdoms of man arose, but Conan knew its meaning. "Come!"

And the Cimmerian came—with a desperate leap and a humming slash of his sword. The beautiful head flew from the body, struck the floor to one side

of the screen, and rolled a little way before coming to rest.

Suddenly Conan's skin crawled, for the screen shook and heaved with the convulsions of something behind. He had seen and heard men die by the scores, and never had he heard a human being make such sounds in his death-throes. There was a thrashing, floundering noise. The screen shook, swayed, tottered, leaned forward, and fell with a metallic crash at Conan's feet. He looked beyond it.

Then the full horror of it rushed over the Cimmerian. 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 slept in their nighted caverns below the black pyramids.

Behind that gilded screen had lain no human body—only the shimmering, headless coils of a gigantic serpent.

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