

The Black Stranger

By Robert E. Howard

1 The Painted Men

One moment the glade lay empty; the next, a man stood poised warily at the edge of the bushes. There had been no sound to warn the grey squirrels of his coming. But the gay-hued birds that flitted about in the sunshine of the open space took fright at his sudden appearance and rose in a clamoring cloud. The man scowled and glanced quickly back the way he had come, as if fearing their flight had betrayed his position to some one unseen. Then he stalked across the glade, placing his feet with care. For all his massive, muscular build he moved with the supple certitude of a panther. He was naked except for a rag twisted about his loins, and his limbs were criss-crossed with scratches from briars, and caked with dried mud. A brown-crust bandage was knotted about his thickly-muscled left arm. Under his matted black mane his face was drawn and gaunt, and his eyes burned like the eyes of a wounded panther. He limped slightly as he followed the dim path that led across the open space.

Halfway across the glade he stopped short and whirled, catlike, facing back the way he had come, as a long-drawn call quavered out across the forest. To another man it would have seemed merely the howl of a wolf. But this man knew it was no wolf. He was a Cimmerian and understood the voices of the wilderness as a city-bred man understands the voices of his friends.

Rage burned redly in his bloodshot eyes as he turned once more and hurried along the path, which, as it left the glade, ran along the edge of a dense thicket that rose in a solid clump of greenery among the trees and bushes. A massive log, deeply embedded in the grassy earth, paralleled the fringe of the thicket, lying between it and the path. When the Cimmerian saw this log he halted and looked back across the glade. To the average eye there were no signs to show that he had passed; but there was evidence visible to his wilderness-sharpened eyes, and therefore to the equally keen eyes of those who pursued him. He snarled silently, the red rage growing in his eyes - the berserk fury of a hunted beast which is ready to turn at bay.

He walked down the trail with comparative carelessness, here and there crushing a grass-blade beneath his foot. Then, when he had reached the further end of the great log, he sprang upon it, turned and ran lightly back along it. The bark had long been worn away by the elements. He left no sign to show the keenest forest-eyes that he had doubled on his trail. When he reached the densest point of the thicket he faded into it like a shadow, with hardly the quiver of a leaf to mark his passing.

The minutes dragged. The grey squirrels chattered again on the branches - then flattened their bodies and were suddenly mute. Again the glade was invaded. As silently as the first man had appeared, three other men materialized out of the eastern edge of the clearing. They were dark-skinned men of short stature, with thickly-muscled chests and arms. They wore beaded buckskin loin-cloths, and an eagle's feather was thrust into each black mane. They were painted in hideous designs, and heavily armed.

They had scanned the glade carefully before showing themselves in the open, for they moved out of the bushes without hesitation, in close single file, treading as softly as leopards, and bending down to stare at the path. They were following the trail of the Cimmerian, but it was no easy task even for these human bloodhounds. They moved slowly across the glade, and then one stiffened, grunted and pointed with his broad-bladed stabbing spear at a crushed grass-blade where the path entered the forest again. All halted instantly and their beady black eyes quested the forest walls. But their quarry was well hidden; they saw nothing to awake their suspicion, and presently they moved on, more rapidly, following the faint marks that seemed to indicate their prey was growing careless through weakness or desperation.

They had just passed the spot where the thicket crowded closest to the ancient trail when the Cimmerian bounded into the path behind them and plunged his knife between the shoulders of the last man. The attack was so quick and unexpected the Pict had no chance to save himself. The blade was in his heart before he knew he was in peril. The other two whirled with the instant, steel-trap quickness of savages, but even as his knife sank home, the Cimmerian struck a tremendous blow with the war-axe in his right hand. The second Pict was in the act of turning as the axe fell. It split his skull to the teeth.

The remaining Pict, a chief by the scarlet tip of his eagle-feather, came savagely to the attack. He was stabbing at the Cimmerian's breast even as the killer wrenched his axe from the dead man's head. The Cimmerian hurled the body against the chief and followed with an attack as furious and desperate as the charge of a wounded tiger. The Pict, staggering under the impact of the corpse against him, made no attempt to parry the dripping axe; the instinct to slay submerging even the instinct to live, he drove his spear ferociously at his enemy's broad breast. The Cimmerian had the advantage of a greater intelligence, and a weapon in each hand. The hatchet, checking its downward sweep, struck the spear aside, and the knife in the Cimmerian's left hand ripped upward into the painted belly.

An awful howl burst from the Pict's lips as he crumpled, disemboweled - a cry not of fear or of pain, but of baffled, bestial fury, the death-screach of a panther. It was answered by a wild chorus of yells some distance east of the glade. The Cimmerian started convulsively, wheeled, crouching like a wild thing at bay, lips asnarl, shaking the sweat from his face. Blood trickled down his forearm from under the bandage.

With a gasping, incoherent imprecation he turned and fled westward. He did not pick his way now, but ran with all the speed of his long legs, calling on the deep and all but inexhaustible reservoirs of endurance which are Nature's compensation for a barbaric

existence. Behind him for a space the woods were silent, then a demoniacal howling burst out at the spot he had recently left, and he knew his pursuers had found the bodies of his victims. He had no breath for cursing the blood-drops that kept spilling to the ground from his freshly opened wound, leaving a trail a child could follow. He had thought that perhaps these three Picts were all that still pursued him of the war-party which had followed him for over a hundred miles. But he might have known these human wolves never quit a blood-trail.

The woods were silent again, and that meant they were racing after him, marking his path by the betraying blood-drops he could not check. A wind out of the west blew against his face, laden with a salty dampness he recognized. Dully he was amazed. If he was that close to the sea the long chase had been even longer than he had realized. But it was nearly over. Even his wolfish vitality was ebbing under the terrible strain. He gasped for breath and there was a sharp pain in his side. His legs trembled with weariness and the lame one ached like the cut of a knife in the tendons each time he set the foot to earth. He had followed the instincts of the wilderness which bred him, straining every nerve and sinew, exhausting every subtlety and artifice to survive. Now in his extremity he was obeying another instinct, looking for a place to turn at bay and sell his life at a bloody price.

He did not leave the trail for the tangled depths on either hand. He knew that it was futile to hope to evade his pursuers now. He ran on down the trail while the blood pounded louder and louder in his ears and each breath he drew was a racking, dry-lipped gulp. Behind him a mad baying broke out, token that they were close on his heels and expected to overhaul their prey swiftly. They would come as fleet as starving wolves now, howling at every leap.

Abruptly he burst from the denseness of the trees and saw, ahead of him, the ground pitching upward, and the ancient trail winding up rocky ledges between jagged boulders. All swam before him in a dizzy red mist, but it was a hill he had come to, a rugged crag rising abruptly from the forest about its foot. And the dim trail wound up to a broad ledge near the summit.

That ledge would be as good a place to die as any. He limped up the trail, going on hands and knees in the steeper places, his knife between his teeth. He had not yet reached the jutting ledge when some forty painted savages broke from among the trees, howling like wolves. At the sight of their prey their screams rose to a devil's crescendo, and they raced toward the foot of the crag, loosing arrows as they came. The shafts showered about the man who doggedly climbed upward, and one stuck in the calf of his leg. Without pausing in his climb he tore it out and threw it aside, heedless of the less accurate missiles which splintered on the rocks about him. Grimly he hauled himself over the rim of the ledge and turned about, drawing his hatchet and shirting knife to hand. He lay glaring down at his pursuers over the rim, only his shock of hair and blazing eyes visible. His chest heaved as he drank in the air in great shuddering gasps, and he clenched his teeth against a tendency toward nausea.

Only a few arrows whistled up at him. The horde knew its prey was cornered. The warriors came on howling, leaping agilely over the rocks at the foot of the hill, war-axes in their hand. The first to reach the crag was a brawny brave whose eagle feather was stained scarlet as a token of chieftainship. He halted briefly, one foot on the sloping trail, arrow notched and drawn halfway back, head thrown back and lips parted for an exultant yell. But the shaft was never loosed. He froze into motionlessness and the blood-lust in his black eyes gave way to a look of startled recognition. With a whoop he gave back, throwing his arms wide to check the rush of his howling braves. The man crouching on the ledge above them understood the Pictish tongue, but he was too far away to catch the significance of the staccato phrases snapped at the warriors by the crimson-feathered chief.

But all ceased their yelping, and stood mutely staring up -not at the man on the ledge, it seemed to him, but at the hill itself. Then without further hesitation, they unstrung their bows and thrust them into buckskin cases at their girdles; turned their backs and trotted across the open space, to melt into the forest without a backward look.

The Cimmerian glared in amazement. He knew the Pictish nature too well not to recognize the finality expressed in the departure. He knew they would not come back. They were heading for their villages, a hundred miles to the east.

But he could not understand it. What was there about his refuge that would cause a Pictish war-party to abandon a chase it had followed so long with all the passion of hungry wolves?

He knew there were sacred places, spots set aside as sanctuaries by the various clans, and that a fugitive, taking refuge in one of these sanctuaries, was safe from the clan which raised it. But the different tribes seldom respected sanctuaries of other tribes; and the men who had pursued him certainly had no sacred spots of their own in this region. They were the men of the Eagle, whose villages lay far to the east, adjoining the country of the Wolf-Picts.

It was the Wolves who had captured him, in a foray against the Aquilonian settlements along Thunder River, and they had given him to the Eagles in return for a captured Wolf chief. The Eaglemen had a red score against the giant Cimmerian, and now it was redder still, for his escape had cost the life of a noted war-chief. That was why they had followed him so relentlessly, over broad rivers and hills and through the long leagues of gloomy forest, the hunting grounds of hostile tribes. And now the survivors of that long chase turned back when their enemy was run to earth and trapped. He shook his head, unable to understand it.

He rose gingerly, dizzy from the long grind, and scarcely able to realize that it was over. His limbs were stiff, his wounds ached. He spat dryly and cursed, rubbing his burning, bloodshot eyes with the back of his thick wrist. He blinked and took stock of his surroundings. Below him the green wilderness waved and billowed away and away in a solid mass, and above its western rim a steel-blue haze he knew hung over the ocean. The

wind stirred his black mane, and the salt tang of the atmosphere revived him. He expanded his enormous chest and drank it in.

Then he turned stiffly and painfully about, growling at the twinge in his bleeding calf, and investigated the ledge whereon he stood. Behind it rose a sheer rocky cliff to the crest of the crag, some thirty feet above him. A narrow ladder-like stair of hand-holds had been niched into the rock. And a few feet from its foot there was a cleft in the wall, wide enough and tall enough for a man to enter.

He limped to the cleft, peered in, and grunted. The sun, hanging high above the western forest, slanted into the cleft, revealing a tunnel-like cavern beyond, and rested a revealing beam on the arch at which this tunnel ended. In that arch was set a heavy iron-bound oaken door!

This was amazing. This country was howling wilderness. The Cimmerian knew that for a thousand miles this western coast ran bare and uninhabited except by the villages of the ferocious sea-land tribes, who were even less civilized than their forest-dwelling brothers.

The nearest outposts of civilization were the frontier settlements along Thunder River, hundreds of miles to the east. The Cimmerian knew he was the only white man ever to cross the wilderness that lay between that river and the coast. Yet that door was no work of Picts.

Being unexplainable, it was an object of suspicion, and suspiciously he approached it, ax and knife ready. Then as his bloodshot eyes became more accustomed to the soft gloom that lurked on either side of the narrow shaft of sunlight, he noticed something else - thick iron-bound chests ranged along the walls. A blaze of comprehension came into his eyes. He bent over one, but the lid resisted his efforts. He lifted his hatchet to shatter the ancient lock then changed his mind and limped toward the arched door. His bearing was more confident now, his weapons hung at his sides. He pushed against the ornately carved door and it swung inward without resistance.

Then his manner changed again, with lightning-like abruptness; he recoiled with a startled curse, knife and hatchet flashing as they leaped to positions of defense. An instant he poised there, like a statue of fierce menace, craning his massive neck to glare through the door. It was darker in the large natural chamber into which he was looking, but a dim glow emanated from the great jewel which stood on a tiny ivory pedestal in the center of the great ebony table about which sat those silent shapes whose appearance had so startled the intruder.

They did not move, they did not turn their heads toward him.

'Well,' he said harshly; 'are you all drunk?'

There was no reply. He was not a man easily abashed, yet now he felt disconcerted.

'You might offer me a glass of that wine you're swigging,' he growled, his natural truculence roused by the awkwardness of the situation. 'By Crom, you show damned poor courtesy to a man who's been one of your own brotherhood. Are you going to—' his

voice trailed into silence, and in silence he stood and stared awhile at those bizarre figures sitting so silently about the great ebon table.

'They're not drunk,' he muttered presently. 'They're not even drinking. What devil's game is this?' He stepped across the threshold and was instantly fighting for his life against the murderous, unseen lingers that clutched his throat.

2 Men From the Sea

Belesa idly stirred a sea-shell with a daintily slippered toe, mentally comparing its delicate pink edges to the first pink haze of dawn that rose over the misty beaches. It was not dawn now, but the sun was not long up, and the light, pearl-grey clouds which drifted over the waters had not yet been dispelled.

Belesa lifted her splendidly shaped head and stared out over a scene alien and repellent to her, yet drearily familiar in every detail. From her dainty feet the tawny sands ran to meet the softly lapping waves which stretched westward to be lost in the blue haze of the horizon. She was standing on the southern curve of the wide bay, and south of her the land sloped upward to the low ridge which formed one horn of that bay. From that ridge, she knew, one could look southward across the bare waters - into infinities of distance as absolute as the view to the westward and to the northward.

Glancing listlessly landward, she absently scanned the fortress which had been her home for the past year. Against a vague pearl and cerulean morning sky floated the golden and scarlet flag of her house - an ensign which awakened no enthusiasm in her youthful bosom, though it had flown triumphantly over many a bloody field in the far South. She made out the figures of men toiling in the gardens and fields that huddled near the fort, seeming to shrink from the gloomy rampart of the forest which fringed the open belt on the east, stretching north and south as far as she could see. She feared that forest, and that fear was shared by every one in that tiny settlement. Nor was it an idle fear - death lurked in those whispering depths, death swift and terrible, death slow and hideous, hidden, painted, tireless, unrelenting.

She sighed and moved listlessly toward the water's edge, with no set purpose in mind. The dragging days were all of one color, and the world of cities and courts and gaiety seemed not only thousands of miles but long ages away. Again she sought in vain for the reason that had caused a Count of Zingara to flee with his retainers to this wild coast, a thousand miles from the land that bore him, exchanging the castle of his ancestors for a hut of logs.

Her eyes softened at the light patter of small bare feet across the sands. A young girl came running over the low sandy ridge, quite naked, her slight body dripping, and her flaxen hair plastered wetly on her small head. Her wistful eyes were wide with excitement.

'Lady Belesa!' she cried, rendering the Zingaran words with a soft Ophirean accent. 'Oh, Lady Belesa!'

Breathless from her scamper, she stammered and made incoherent gestures with her hands. Belesa smiled and put an arm about the child, not minding that her silken dress came in contact with the damp, warm body. In her lonely, isolated life Belesa bestowed the tenderness of a naturally affectionate nature on the pitiful waif she had taken away from a brutal master encountered on that long voyage up from the southern coasts.

'What are you trying to tell me, Tina? Get your breath, child.'

'A ship!' cried the girl, pointing southward. 'I was swimming in a pool that the sea-tide left in the sand, on the other side of the ridge, and I saw it! A ship sailing up out of the south!'

She tugged timidly at Belesa's hand, her slender body all aquiver, and Belesa felt her own heart beat faster at the mere thought of an unknown visitor. They had seen no sail since coming to that barren shore.

Tina flitted ahead of her over the yellow sands, skirting the tiny pools the outgoing tide had left in shallow depressions. They mounted the low undulating ridge, and Tina poised there, a slender white figure against the clearing sky, her wet flaxen hair blowing about her thin face, a frail quivering arm outstretched.

'Look, my Lady!'

Belesa had already seen it - a billowing white sail, filled with the freshening south wind, beating up along the coast, a few miles from the point. Her heart skipped a beat. A small thing can loom large in colorless and isolated lives; but Belesa felt a premonition of strange and violent events. She felt that it was not by chance that this sail was beating up this lonely coast. There was no harbor town to the north, though one sailed to the ultimate shores of ice; and the nearest port to the south was a thousand miles away. What brought this stranger to lonely Korvela Bay?

Tina pressed close to her mistress, apprehension pinching her thin features.

'Who can it be, my Lady?' she stammered, the wind whipping color to her pale cheeks. 'Is it the man the Count fears?'

Belesa looked down at her, her brow shadowed.

'Why do you say that, child? How do you know my uncle fears anyone?'

'He must,' returned Tina naively, 'or he would never have come to hide in this lonely spot. Look, my Lady, how fast it comes!'

'We must go and inform my uncle,' murmured Belesa. 'The fishing boats have not yet gone out, and none of the men have seen that sail. Get your clothes, Tina. Hurry!'

The child scampered down the low slope to the pool where she had been bathing when she sighted the craft, and snatched up the slippers, tunic and girdle she had left lying on

the sand. She skipped back up the ridge, hopping grotesquely as she donned her scanty garments in mid-flight.

Belesa, anxiously watching the approaching sail, caught her hand, and they hurried toward the fort. A few moments after they had entered the gate of the log palisade which enclosed the building, the strident blare of the trumpet startled the workers in the gardens, and the men just opening the boat-house doors to push the fishing boats down their rollers to the water's edge.

Every man outside the fort dropped his tool or abandoned whatever he was doing and ran for the stockade without pausing to look about for the cause of the alarm. The straggling lines of fleeing men converged on the opened gate, and every head was twisted over its shoulder to gaze fearfully at the dark line of woodland to the east. Not one looked seaward.

They thronged through the gate, shouting questions at the sentries who patrolled the firing-ledges built below the up-jutting points of the upright palisade logs.

'What is it? Why are we called in? Are the Picts coming?'

For answer one taciturn man-at-arms in worn leathers and rusty steel pointed southward. From his vantage-point the sail was now visible. Men began to climb up on the ledges, staring toward the sea.

On a small lookout tower on the roof of the manor house, which was built of logs like the other buildings, Count Valenso watched the on-sweeping sail as it rounded the point of the southern horn. The Count was a lean, wiry man of medium height and late middle age. He was dark, somber of expression. Trunk-hose and doublet were of black silk, the only color about his costume the jewels that twinkled on his sword hilt, and the wine-colored cloak thrown carelessly over his shoulder. He twisted his thin black mustache nervously, and turned his gloomy eyes on his seneschal - a leather-featured man in steel and satin.

'What do you make of it, Galbro?'

'A carack,' answered the seneschal. 'It is a carack trimmed and rigged like a craft of the Barachan pirates - look there!'

A chorus of cries below them echoed his ejaculation; the ship had cleared the point and was slanting inward across the bay. And all saw the flag that suddenly broke forth from the masthead - a black flag, with a scarlet skull gleaming in the sun.

The people within the stockade stared wildly at that dread emblem; then all eyes turned up toward the tower, where the master of the fort stood somberly, his cloak whipping about him in the wind.

'It's a Barachan, all right,' grunted Galbro. 'And unless I am mad, it's Strom's Red Hand. What is he doing on this naked coast?'

'He can mean no good for us,' growled the Count. A glance below showed him that the massive gates had been closed, and that the captain of his men-at-arms, gleaming in steel, was directing his men to their stations, some to the ledges, some to the tower loop-holes. He was massing his main strength along the western wall, in the midst of which was the gate.

Valenso had been followed into exile by a hundred men: soldiers, vassals and serfs. Of these some forty were men-at-arms, wearing helmets and suits of mail, armed with swords, axes and crossbows. The rest were toilers, without armor save for shirts of toughened leather, but they were brawny stalwarts, and skilled in the use of their hunting bows, woodsmen's axes, and boar-spears. They took their places, scowling at their hereditary enemies. The pirates of the Barachan Isles, a tiny archipelago off the southwestern coast of Zingara, had preyed on the people of the mainland for more than a century.

The men on the stockade gripped their bows or boar-spears and stared somberly at the carack which swung inshore, its brass work flashing in the sun. They could see the figures swarming on the deck, and hear the lusty yells of the seamen. Steel twinkled along the rail.

The Count had retired from the tower, shooing his niece and her eager protegee before him, and having donned helmet and cuirass, he betook himself to the palisade to direct the defense. His subjects watched him with moody fatalism. They intended to sell their lives as dearly as they could, but they had scant hope of victory, in spite of their strong position. They were oppressed by a conviction of doom. A year on that naked coast, with the brooding threat of that devil-haunted forest looming for ever at their backs, had shadowed their souls with gloomy forebodings. Their women stood silently in the doorways of their huts, built inside the stockade, and quieted the clamor of their children.

Belesa and Tina watched eagerly from an upper window in the manor house, and Belesa felt the child's tense little body all aquiver within the crook of her protecting arm.

'They will cast anchor near the boat-house,' murmured Belesa. 'Yes! There goes their anchor, a hundred yards offshore. Do not tremble so, child! They can not take the fort. Perhaps they wish only fresh water and supplies. Perhaps a storm blew them into these seas.'

'They are coming ashore in long boats!' exclaimed the child. 'Oh, my Lady, I am afraid! They are big men in armor! Look how the sun strikes fire from their pikes and burgonets! Will they eat us?'

Belesa burst into laughter in spite of her apprehension.

'Of course not! Who put that idea into your head?'

'Zingelito told me the Barachans eat women.'

'He was teasing you. The Barachans are cruel, but they are no worse than the Zingaran renegades who call themselves buccaneers. Zingelito was a buccaneer once.'

'He was cruel,' muttered the child. 'I'm glad the Picts cut his head off.'

'Hush, child.' Belesa shuddered slightly. 'You must not speak that way. Look, the pirates have reached the shore. They line the beach, and one of them is coming toward the fort. That must be Strom.'

'Ahoy, the fort there!' came a hail in a voice gusty as the wind. 'I come under a flag of truce!'

The Count's helmeted head appeared over the points of the palisade; his stern face, framed in steel, surveyed the pirate somberly. Strom had halted just within good earshot. He was a big man, bare-headed, his tawny hair blowing in the wind. Of all the sea-rovers who haunted the Barachans, none was more famed for deviltry than he.

'Speak!' commanded Valenso. 'I have scant desire to converse with one of your breed.'

Strom laughed with his lips, not with his eyes.

'When your galleon escaped me in that squall off the Tralli-bes last year I never thought to meet you again on the Pictish Coast, Valenso!' said he. 'Although at the time I wondered what your destination might be. By Mitra, had I known, I would have followed you then! I got the start of my life a little while ago when I saw your scarlet falcon floating over a fortress where I had thought to see naught but bare beach. You have found it, of course?'

'Found what?' snapped the Count impatiently.

'Don't try to dissemble with me!' The pirate's stormy nature showed itself momentarily in a flash of impatience. 'I know why you came here - and I have come for the same reason. I don't intend to be balked. Where is your ship?'

'That is none of your affair.'

'You have none,' confidently asserted the pirate. 'I see pieces of a galleon's masts in that stockade. It must have been wrecked, somehow, after you landed here. If you'd had a ship you'd have sailed away with your plunder long ago.'

'What are you talking about, damn you?' yelled the Count. 'My plunder? Am I a Barachan to burn and loot? Even so, what would I loot on this naked coast?'

'That which you came to find,' answered the pirate coolly. 'The same thing I'm after - and mean to have. But I'll be easy to deal with - just give me the loot and I'll go my way and leave you in peace.'

'You must be mad,' snarled Valenso. 'I came here to find solitude and seclusion, which I enjoyed until you crawled out of the sea, you yellow-headed dog. Begone! I did not ask for a parley, and I weary of this empty talk. Take your rogues and go your ways.'

'When I go I'll leave that hovel in ashes!' roared the pirate in a transport of rage. 'For the last time - will you give me the loot in return for your lives? I have you hemmed in here, and a hundred and fifty men ready to cut your throats at my word.'

For answer the Count made a quick gesture with his hand below the points of the palisade. Almost instantly a shaft hummed venomously through a loop-hole and splintered on Strom's breastplate. The pirate yelled ferociously, bounded back and ran toward the beach, with arrows whistling all about him. His men roared and came on like a wave, blades gleaming in the sun.

'Curse you, dog!' raved the Count, felling the offending archer with his iron-clad fist. 'Why did you not strike his throat above the gorget? Ready with your bows, men - here they come!'

But Strom had reached his men, checked their headlong rush. The pirates spread out in a long line that overlapped the extremities of the western wall, and advanced warily, loosing their shafts as they came. Their weapon was the longbow, and their archery was superior to that of the Zingarans. But the latter were protected by their barrier. The long arrows arched over the stockade and quivered upright in the earth. One struck the window-sill over which Belesa watched, wringing a cry of fear from Tina, who cringed back, her wide eyes fixed on the venomous vibrating shaft.

The Zingarans sent their bolts and hunting arrows in return, aiming and loosing without undue haste. The women had herded the children into their huts and now stoically awaited whatever fate the gods had in store for them.

The Barachans were famed for their furious and headlong style of battling, but they were weary as they were ferocious, and did not intend to waste their strength vainly in direct charges against the ramparts. They maintained their widespread formation, creeping along and taking advantage of every natural depression and bit of vegetation - which was not much, for the ground had been cleared on all sides of the fort against the threat of Pictish raids.

A few bodies lay prone on the sandy earth, back-pieces glinting in the sun, quarrel shafts standing up from arm-pit or neck. But the pirates were quick as cats, always shirting their position, and were protected by their light armor. Their constant raking fire was a continual menace to the men in the stockade. Still, it was evident that as long as the battle remained an exchange of archery, the advantage must remain with the sheltered Zingarans.

But down at the boat-house on the beach, men were at work with axes. The Count cursed sulphurously when he saw the havoc they were making among his boats, which had been built laboriously of planks sawn out of solid logs.

'They're making a mantlet, curse them!' he raged. 'A sally now, before they complete it - while they're scattered—'

Galbro shook his head, glancing at the bare-armed henchmen with their clumsy pikes.

'Their arrows would riddle us, and we'd be no match for them in hand-to-hand fighting. We must keep behind our walls and trust to our archers.'

'Well enough,' growled Valenso. 'If we can keep them outside our walls.'

Presently the intention of the pirates became apparent to all, as a group of some thirty men advanced, pushing before them a great shield made out of the planks from the boats, and the timbers of the boat-house itself. They had found an ox-cart, and mounted the mantlet on the wheels, great solid disks of oak. As they rolled it ponderously before them it hid them from the sight of the defenders except for glimpses of their moving feet.

It rolled toward the gate, and the straggling line of archers converged toward it, shooting as they ran.

'Shoot!' yelled Valenso, going livid. 'Stop them before they reach the gate!'

A storm of arrows whistled across the palisade, and feathered themselves harmlessly in the thick wood. A derisive yell answered the volley. Shafts were finding loop-holes now, as the rest of the pirates drew nearer, and a soldier reeled and fell from the ledge, gasping and choking, with a clothyard shaft through his throat.

'Shoot at their feet!' screamed Valenso; and then - 'Forty men at the gate with pikes and axes! The rest hold the wall!'

Bolts ripped into the sand before the moving shield. A bloodthirsty howl announced that one had found its target beneath the edge, and a man staggered into view, cursing and hopping as he strove to withdraw the quarrel that skewered his foot. In an instant he was feathered by a dozen hunting arrows.

But, with a deep-throated shout, the mantlet was pushed to the wall, and a heavy, iron-tipped boom, thrust through an aperture in the center of the shield, began to thunder on the gate, driven by arms knotted with brawny muscles and backed with blood-thirsty fury. The massive gate groaned and staggered, while from the stockade bolts poured in a steady hail and some struck home. But the wild men of the sea were afire with the fighting-lust.

With deep shouts they swung the ram, and from all sides the others closed in, braving the weakened fire from the walls, and shooting fast and hard.

Cursing like a madman, the Count sprang from the wall and ran to the gate, drawing his sword. A clump of desperate men-at-arms closed in behind him, gripping their spears. In another moment the gate would cave in and they must stop the gap with their living bodies.

Then a new note entered the clamor of the melee. It was a trumpet, blaring stridently from the ship. On the cross-trees a figure waved his arms and gesticulated wildly.

That sound registered on Strom's ears, even as he lent his strength to the swinging ram. Exerting his mighty thews he resisted the surge of the other arms, bracing his legs to halt the ram on its backward swing. He turned his head, sweat dripping from his face.

'Wait!' he roared. 'Wait, damn you! Listen!'

In the silence that followed that bull's bellow, the blare of the trumpet was plainly heard, and a voice that shouted something unintelligible to the people inside the stockade.

But Strom understood, for his voice was lifted again in profane command. The ram was released, and the mantlet began to recede from the gate as swiftly as it had advanced.

'Look!' cried Tina at her window, jumping up and down in her wild excitement. 'They are running! All of them! They are running to the beach! Look! They have abandoned the shield just out of range! They are leaping into the boats and rowing for the ship! Oh, my Lady, have we won?'

'I think not!' Belesa was staring sea-ward. 'Look!'

She threw the curtains aside and leaned from the window. Her clear young voice rose above the amazed shouts of the defenders, turned their heads in the direction she pointed. They sent up a deep yell as they saw another ship swinging majestically around the southern point. Even as they looked she broke out the royal golden flag of Zingara.

Strom's pirates were swarming up the sides of their carack, heaving up the anchor. Before the stranger had progressed halfway across the bay, the Red Hand was vanishing around the point of the northern horn.

3 The Coming of the Black Man

'Out, quick!' snapped the Count, tearing at the bars of the gate. 'Destroy that mantlet before these strangers can land!'

'But Strom has fled,' expostulated Galbro, 'and yonder ship is Zingaran.'

'Do as I order!' roared Valenso. 'My enemies are not all foreigners! Out, dogs! Thirty of you, with axes, and make kindling wood of that mantlet. Bring the wheels into the stockade.'

Thirty axemen raced down toward the beach, brawny men in sleeveless tunics, their axes gleaming in the sun. The manner of their lord had suggested a possibility of peril in that oncoming ship, and there was panic in their haste. The splintering of the timbers under their flying axes came plainly to the people inside the fort, and the axemen were racing back across the sands, trundling the great oaken wheels with them, before the Zingaran ship had dropped anchor where the pirate ship had stood.

'Why does not the Count open the gate and go down to meet them?' wondered Tina. 'Is he afraid that the man he fears might be on that ship?'

'What do you mean, Tina?' Belesa demanded uneasily. The Count had never vouchsafed a reason for this self-exile. He was not the sort of a man to run from an enemy, though he had many. But this conviction of Tina's was disquieting; almost uncanny.

Tina seemed not to have heard her question.

'The axemen are back in the stockade,' she said. 'The gate is closed again and barred. The men still keep their places along the wall. If that ship was chasing Strom, why did it not pursue him? But it is not a war-ship. It is a carack, like the other. Look, a boat is coming ashore. I see a man in the bow, wrapped in a dark cloak.'

The boat having grounded, this man came pacing leisurely up the sands, followed by three others. He was a tall, wiry man, clad in black silk and polished steel.

'Halt!' roared the Count. 'I will parley with your leader alone!'

The taller stranger removed his morion and made a sweeping bow. His companions halted, drawing their wide cloaks about them, and behind them the sailors leaned on their oars and stared at the flag floating over the palisade.

When he came within easy call of the gate: 'Why surely,' said he, 'there should be no suspicion between gentlemen in these naked seas!'

Valenso stared at him suspiciously. The stranger was dark, with a lean, predatory face, and a thin black mustache. A bunch of lace was gathered at his throat, and there was lace on his wrists.

'I know you,' said Valenso slowly. 'You are Black Zarono, the buccaneer.'

Again the stranger bowed with stately elegance.

'And none could fail to recognize the red falcon of the Korzettas!'

'It seems this coast has become the rendezvous of all the rogues of the southern seas,' growled Valenso. 'What do you wish?'

'Come, come, sir!' remonstrated Zarono. This is a churlish greeting to one who has just rendered you a service. Was not that Argossean dog, Strom, just thundering at your gate? And did he not take to his sea-heels when he saw me round the point?'

'True,' grunted the Count grudgingly. 'Though there is little to choose between a pirate and a renegade.'

Zarono laughed without resentment and twirled his mustache.

'You are blunt in speech, my Lord. But I desire only leave to anchor in your bay, to let my men hunt for meat and water in your woods, and perhaps, to drink a glass of wine myself at your board.'

'I see not how I can stop you,' growled Valenso. 'But understand this, Zarono: no man of your crew conies within this palisade. If one approaches closer than a hundred feet, he will presently find an arrow through his gizzard. And I charge you do no harm to my gardens or the cattle in the pens. Three steers you may have for fresh meat, but no more. And we can hold this fort against your ruffians, in case you think otherwise.'

'You were not holding it very successfully against Strom,' the buccaneer pointed out with a mocking smile.

'You'll find no wood to build mantlets unless you chop down trees, or strip it from your own ship,' assured the Count grimly. 'And your men are not Barachan archers; they're no better bowmen than mine. Besides, what little loot you'd find in this castle would not be worth the price.'

'Who speaks of loot and warfare?' protested Zaron. 'Nay, my men are sick to stretch their legs ashore, and nigh to scurvy from chewing salt pork. I guarantee their good conduct. May they come ashore?'

Valenso grudgingly signified his content, and Zaron bowed, a thought sardonically, and retired with a tread as measured and stately as if he trod the polished crystal floor of the Kordava royal court, where indeed, unless rumor lied, he had once been a familiar figure.

'Let no man leave the stockade,' Valenso ordered Galibro. 'I do not trust that renegade dog. Because he drove Strom from our gate is no guarantee that he would not cut our throats.'

Galbro nodded. He was well aware of the enmity which existed between the pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. The pirates were mainly Argossean sailors, turned outlaw; to the ancient feud between Argos and Zingara was added, in the case of the freebooters, the rivalry of opposing interests. Both breeds preyed on the shipping and the coastal towns; and they preyed on one another with equal rapacity.

So no one stirred from the palisade while the buccaneers came ashore, dark-faced men in flaming silk and polished steel, with scarfs bound about their heads and gold hoops in their ears. They camped on the beach, a hundred and seventy-odd of them, and Valenso noticed that Zaron posted lookouts on both points. They did not molest the gardens, and only the three beeves designated by Valenso, shouting from the palisade, were driven forth and slaughtered. Fires were kindled on the strand, and a wattled cask of ale was brought ashore and broached.

Other kegs were filled with water from the spring that rose a short distance south of the fort, and men began to straggle toward the woods, crossbows in their hands. Seeing this, Valenso was moved to shout to Zaron, striding back and forth through the camp: 'Don't let your men go into the forest. Take another steer from the pens if you haven't enough meat. If they go trampling into the woods they may fall foul of the Picts.'

'Whole tribes of the painted devils live back in the forest. We beat off an attack shortly after we landed, and since then six of my men have been murdered in the forest, at one time or another. There's peace between us just now, but it hangs by a thread. Don't risk stirring them up.'

Zaron shot a startled glance at the lowering woods, as if he expected to see hordes of savage figures lurking there. Then he bowed and said: 'I thank you for the warning, my Lord.' And he shouted for his men to come back, in a rasping voice that contrasted strangely with his courtly accents when addressing the Count.

If Zarono could have penetrated the leafy mask he would have been more apprehensive, if he could have seen the sinister figure that lurked there, watching the strangers with inscrutable black eyes - a hideously painted warrior, naked but for a doeskin breech-clout, with a toucan feather drooping over his left ear.

As evening drew on, a thin skim of gray crawled up from the sea-rim and overcast the sky. The sun sank in a wallow of crimson, touching the tips of the black waves with blood. Fog crawled out of the sea and lapped at the feet of the forest, curling about the stockade in smoky wisps. The fires on the beach shone dull crimson through the mist, and the singing of the buccaneers seemed deadened and far away. They had brought old sail-canvas from the carack and made them shelters along the strand, where beef was still roasting, and the ale granted them by their captain was doled out sparingly.

The great gate was shut and barred. Soldiers stolidly tramped the ledges of the palisade, pike on shoulder, beads of moisture glistening on their steel caps. They glanced uneasily at the fires on the beach, stared with greater fixity toward the forest, now a vague dark line in the crawling fog. The compound lay empty of life, a bare, darkened space. Candles gleamed feebly through the crack of the huts, and light streamed from the windows of the manor. There was silence except for the tread of the sentries, the drip of water from the eaves, and the distant singing of the buccaneers.

Some faint echo of this singing penetrated into the great hall where Valenso sat at wine with his unsolicited guest.

'Your men make merry, sir,' grunted the Count.

'They are glad to feel the sand under their feet again,' answered Zarono. 'It has been a wearisome voyage - yes, a long, stern chase.' He lifted his goblet gallantly to the unresponsive girl who sat on his host's right, and drank ceremoniously.

Impassive attendants ranged the walls, soldiers with pikes and helmets, servants in satin coats. Valenso's household in this wild land was a shadowy reflection of the court he had kept in Kordava.

The manor house, as he insisted on calling it, was a marvel for that coast. A hundred men had worked night and day for months building it. Its log-walled exterior was devoid of ornamentation, but, within, it was as nearly a copy of Korzetta Castle as was possible. The logs that composed the walls of the hall were hidden with heavy silk tapestries, worked in gold. Ship beams, stained and polished, formed the beams of the lofty ceiling. The floor was covered with rich carpets. The broad stair that led up from the hall was likewise carpeted, and its massive balustrade had once been a galleon's rail.

A fire in the wide stone fireplace dispelled the dampness of the night. Candles in the great silver candelabrum in the center of the broad mahogany board lit the hall, throwing long shadows on the stair. Count Valenso sat at the head of that table, presiding over a company composed of his niece, his piratical guest, Galbro, and the captain of the guard. The smallness of the company emphasized the proportions of the vast board, where fifty guests might have sat at ease.

'You followed Strom?' asked Valenso. 'You drove him this far afield?'

'I followed Strom,' laughed Zaron, 'but he was not fleeing from me. Strom is not the man to flee from anyone. No; he came seeking for something; something I too desire.'

'What could tempt a pirate or a buccaneer to this naked land?' muttered Valenso, staring into the sparkling contents of his goblet.

'What could tempt a count of Kordava?' retorted Zaron, and an avid light burned an instant in his eyes.

'The rottenness of a royal court might sicken a man of honor,' remarked Valenso.

'Korzettas of honor have endured its rottenness with tranquillity for several generations,' said Zaron bluntly. 'My Lord, indulge my curiosity - why did you sell your lands, load your galleon with the furnishings of your castle and sail over the horizon out of the knowledge of the king and the nobles of Zingara? And why settle here, when your sword and your name might carve out a place for you in any civilized land?'

Valenso toyed with the golden seal-chain about his neck.

'As to why I left Zingara,' he said, 'that is my own affair. But it was chance that left me stranded here. I had brought all my people ashore, and much of the furnishings you mentioned, intending to build a temporary habitation. But my ship, anchored out there in the bay, was driven against the cliffs of the north point and wrecked by a sudden storm out of the west. Such storms are common enough at certain times of the year. After that there was naught to do but remain and make the best of it.'

'Then you would return to civilization, if you could?'

'Not to Kordava. But perhaps to some far clime - to Vendhya, or Khitai—'

'Do you not find it tedious here, my Lady?' asked Zaron, for the first time addressing himself directly to Belesa.

Hunger to see a new face and hear a new voice had brought the girl to the great hall that night. But now she wished she had remained in her chamber with Tina. There was no mistaking the meaning in the glance Zaron turned on her. His speech was decorous and formal, his expression sober and respectful; but it was but a mask through which gleamed the violent and sinister spirit of the man. He could not keep the burning desire out of his eyes when he looked at the aristocratic young beauty in her low-necked satin gown and jeweled girdle. 'There is little diversity here,' she answered in a low voice.

'If you had a ship,' Zaron bluntly asked his host, 'you would abandon this settlement?'

'Perhaps,' admitted the Count.

'I have a ship,' said Zaron. 'If we could reach an agreement—'

'What sort of an agreement?' Valenso lifted his head to stare suspiciously at his guest.

'Share and share alike,' said Zaron, laying his hand on the board with the fingers spread wide. The gesture was curiously reminiscent of a great spider. But the fingers quivered with curious tension, and the buccaneer's eyes burned with a new light.

'Share what?' Valenso stared at him in evident bewilderment. 'The gold I brought with me went down in my ship, and unlike the broken timbers, it did not wash ashore.'

'Not that!' Zaron made an impatient gesture. 'Let us be frank, my Lord. Can you pretend it was chance which caused you to land at this particular spot, with a thousand miles of coast from which to choose?'

'There is no need for me to pretend,' answered Valenso coldly. 'My ship's master was one Zingelito, formerly a buccaneer. He had sailed this coast, and persuaded me to land here, telling me he had a reason he would later disclose. But this reason he never divulged, because the day after we landed he disappeared into the woods, and his headless body was found later by a hunting party. Obviously he was ambushed and slain by the Picts.'

Zaron stared fixedly at Valenso for a space.

'Sink me,' quoth he at last, 'I believe you, my Lord. A Korzetta has no skill at lying, regardless of his other accomplishments. And I will make you a proposal. I will admit when I anchored out there in the bay I had other plans in mind. Supposing you to have already secured the treasure, I meant to take this fort by strategy and cut all your throats. But circumstances have caused me to change my mind—' He cast a glance at Belesa that brought the color into her face, and made her lift her head indignantly.

'I have a ship to carry you out of exile,' said the buccaneer, 'with your household and such of your retainers as you shall choose. The rest can fend for themselves.'

The attendants along the walls shot uneasy glances sidelong at each other. Zaron went on, too brutally cynical to conceal his intentions.

'But first you must help me secure the treasure for which I've sailed a thousand miles.'

'What treasure, in Mitra's name?' demanded the Count angrily. 'You are yammering like that dog Strom, now.'

'Did you ever hear of Bloody Trancos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?' asked Zaron.

'Who has not? It was he who stormed the island castle of the exiled prince Tothmekri of Stygia, put the people to the sword and bore off the treasure the prince had brought with him when he fled from Khemi.'

'Aye! And the tale of that treasure brought the men of the Red Brotherhood swarming like vultures after carrion - pirates, buccaneers, even the black corsairs from the South. Fearing betrayal by his captains, he fled northward with one ship, and vanished from the knowledge of men. That was nearly a hundred years ago.'

'But the tale persists that one man survived that last voyage, and returned to the Barachans, only to be captured by a Zingaran war-ship. Before he was hanged he told his

story and drew a map in his own blood, on parchment, which he smuggled somehow out of his captor's reach. This was the tale he told: Tranicos had sailed far beyond the paths of shipping, until he came to a bay on a lonely coast, and there he anchored. He went ashore, taking his treasure and eleven of his most trusted captains who had accompanied him on his ship. Following his orders, the ship sailed away, to return in a week's time, and pick up their admiral and his captains. In the meantime Tranicos meant to hide the treasure somewhere in the vicinity of the bay. The ship returned at the appointed time, but there was no trace of Tranicos and his eleven captains, except the rude dwelling they had built on the beach.

'This had been demolished, and there were tracks of naked feet about it, but no sign to show there had been any fighting. Nor was there any trace of the treasure, or any sign to show where it was hidden. The pirates plunged into the forest to search for their chief and his captains, but were attacked by wild Picts and driven back to their ship. In despair they heaved anchor and sailed away, but before they raised the Barachans, a terrific storm wrecked the ship and only that one man survived.

'That is the tale of the Treasure of Tranicos, which men have sought in vain for nearly a century. That the map exists is known, but its whereabouts have remained a mystery.

'I have had one glimpse of that map. Strom and Zingelito were with me, and a Nemedian who sailed with the Barachans. We looked upon it in a hovel in a certain Zingaran sea-port town, where we were skulking in disguise. Somebody knocked over the lamp, and somebody howled in the dark, and when we got the light on again, the old miser who owned the map was dead with a dirk in his heart, and the map was gone, and the night-watch was clattering down the street with their pikes to investigate the clamor. We scattered, and each went his own way.

'For years thereafter Strom and I watched one another, each supposing the other had the map. Well, as it turned out, neither had it, but recently word came to me that Strom had departed northward, so I followed him. You saw the end of that chase.

'I had but a glimpse at the map as it lay on the old miser's table, and could tell nothing about it. But Strom's actions show that he knows this is the bay where Tranicos anchored. I believe that they hid the treasure somewhere in that forest and returning, were attacked and slain by the Picts. The Picts did not get the treasure. Men have traded up and down this coast a little, knowing nothing of the treasure, and no gold ornament or rare jewel has ever been seen in the possession of the coastal tribes.

'This is my proposal: let us combine our forces. Strom is somewhere within striking distance. He fled because he feared to be pinned between us, but he will return. But allied, we can laugh at him. We can work out from the fort, leaving enough men here to hold it if he attacks. I believe the treasure is hidden near by. Twelve men could not have conveyed it far. We will find it, load it in my ship, and sail for some foreign port where I can cover my past with gold. I am sick of this life. I want to go back to a civilized land, and live like a noble, with riches, and slaves, and a castle - and a wife of noble blood.'

'Well?' demanded the Count, slit-eyed with suspicion.

'Give me your niece for my wife,' demanded the buccaneer bluntly.

Belesa cried out sharply and started to her feet. Valenso likewise rose, livid, his fingers knotting convulsively about his goblet as if he contemplated hurling it at his guest. Zaronno did not move; he sat still, one arm on the table and the fingers hooked like talons. His eyes smoldered with passion, and a deep menace.

'You dare!' ejaculated Valenso.

'You seem to forget you have fallen from your high estate, Count Valenso,' growled Zaronno. 'We are not at the Kordavan court, my Lord. On this naked coast nobility is measured by the power of men and arms. And there I rank you. Strangers tread Korzetta Castle, and the Korzetta fortune is at the bottom of the sea. You will die here, an exile, unless I give you the use of my ship.'

'You will have no cause to regret the union of our houses. With a new name and a new fortune you will find that Black Zaronno can take his place among the aristocrats of the world and make a son-in-law of which not even a Korzetta need be ashamed.'

'You are mad to think of it!' exclaimed the Count violently. 'You— who is that?'

A patter of soft-slipped feet distracted his attention. Tina came hurriedly into the hall, hesitated when she saw the Count's eyes fixed angrily on her, curtsied deeply, and sidled around the table to thrust her small hands into Belesa's fingers. She was panting slightly, her slippers were damp, and her flaxen hair was plastered down on her head.

'Tina!' exclaimed Belesa anxiously. 'Where have you been? I thought you were in your chamber, hours ago.'

'I was,' answered the child breathlessly, 'but I missed my coral necklace you gave me—' She held it up, a trivial trinket, but prized beyond all her other possessions because it had been Belesa's first gift to her. 'I was afraid you wouldn't let me go if you knew - a soldier's wife helped me out of the stockade and back again - please, my Lady, don't make me tell who she was, because I promised not to. I found my necklace by the pool where I bathed this morning. Please punish me if I have done wrong.'

'Tina!' groaned Belesa, clasping the child to her. 'I'm not going to punish you. But you should not have gone outside the palisade, with these buccaneers camped on the beach, and always a chance of Picts skulking about. Let me take you to your chamber and change these damp clothes—'

'Yes, my Lady,' murmured Tina, 'but first let me tell you about the black man—'

'What?' The startling interruption was a cry that burst from Valenso's lips. His goblet clattered to the floor as he caught the table with both hands. If a thunderbolt had struck him, the lord of the castle's bearing could not have been more subtly or horrifyingly altered. His face was livid, his eyes almost starting from his head.

'What did you say?' he panted, glaring wildly at the child who shrank back against Belesa in bewilderment. 'What did you say, wench?'

'A black man, my Lord,' she stammered, while Belesa, Zaron and the attendants stared at him in amazement. 'When I went down to the pool to get my necklace, I saw him. There was a strange moaning in the wind, and the sea whimpered like a thing in fear, and then he came. I was afraid, and hid behind a little ridge of sand. He came from the sea in a strange black boat with blue fire playing all about it, but there was no torch. He drew his boat up on the sands below the south point, and strode toward the forest, looking like a giant in the fog - a great, tall man, black like a Kushite—'

Valenso reeled as if he had received a mortal blow. He clutched at his throat, snapping the golden chain in his violence. With the face of a madman he lurched about the table and tore the child screaming from Belesa's arms.

'You little slut,' he panted. 'You lie! You have heard me mumbling in my sleep and have told this lie to torment me! Say you lie before I tear the skin from your back!'

'Uncle!' cried Belesa, in outraged bewilderment, trying to free Tina from his grasp. 'Are you mad? What are you about?'

With a snarl he tore her hand from his arm and spun her staggering into the arms of Galbro who received her with a leer he made little effort to disguise.

'Mercy, my Lord!' sobbed Tina. 'I did not lie!'

'I said you lied!' roared Valenso. 'Gebbrelo!'

The stolid serving man seized the trembling youngster and stripped her with one brutal wrench that tore her scanty garments from her body. Wheeling, he drew her slender arms over his shoulders, lifting her writhing feet clear of the floor.

'Uncle! shrieked Belesa, writhing vainly in Galbro's lustful grasp. 'You are mad! You can not - oh, you can not—!' The voice choked in her throat as Valenso caught up a jewel-hiked riding whip and brought it down across the child's frail body with a savage force that left a red weal across her naked shoulders.

Belesa moaned, sick with the anguish in Tina's shriek. The world had suddenly gone mad. As in a nightmare she saw the stolid faces of the soldiers and servants, beast-faces, the faces of oxen, reflecting neither pity nor sympathy. Zaron's faintly sneering face was part of the nightmare. Nothing in that crimson haze was real except Tina's naked white body, crisscrossed with red welts from shoulders to knees; no sound real except the child's sharp cries of agony, and the panting gasps of Valenso as he lashed away with the staring eyes of a madman, shrieking: 'You lie! You lie! Curse you, you lie! Admit your guilt, or I will flay your stubborn body! He could not have followed me here—'

'Oh, have mercy, my Lord!' screamed the child, writhing vainly on the brawny servant's back, too frantic with fear and pain to have the wit to save herself by a lie. Blood trickled in crimson beads down her quivering thighs. 'I saw him! I do not lie! Mercy! Please! Ahhhh!'

'You fool! You fool? screamed Belesa, almost beside herself. 'Do you not see she is telling the truth? Oh, you beast! Beast! Beast!'

Suddenly some shred of sanity seemed to return to the brain of Count Valenso Korzetta. Dropping the whip he reeled back and fell up against the table, clutching blindly at its edge. He shook as with an ague. His hair was plastered across his brow in dank strands, and sweat dripped from his livid countenance which was like a carven mask of Fear. Tina, released by Gebbrelo, slipped to the floor in a whimpering heap. Belesa tore free from Galbro, rushed to her, sobbing, and fell on her knees, gathering the pitiful waif into her arms. She lifted a terrible face to her uncle, to pour upon him the full vials of her wrath - but he was not looking at her. He seemed to have forgotten both her and his victim. In a daze of incredulity, she heard him say to the buccaneer: 'I accept your offer, Zaron; in Mitra's name, let us find this accursed treasure and begone from this damned coast!'

At this the fire of her fury sank to sick ashes. In stunned silence she lifted the sobbing child in her arms and carried her up the stair. A glance backward showed Valenso crouching rather than sitting at the table, gulping wine from a huge goblet he gripped in both shaking hands, while Zaron towered over him like a somber predatory bird - puzzled at the turn of events, but quick to take advantage of the shocking change that had come over the Count. He was talking in a low, decisive voice, and Valenso nodded mute agreement, like one who scarcely heeds what is being said. Galbro stood back in the shadows, chin pinched between forefinger and thumb, and the attendants along the walls glanced furtively at each other, bewildered by their lord's collapse.

Up in her chamber Belesa laid the half-fainting girl on the bed and set herself to wash and apply soothing ointments to the weals and cuts on her tender skin. Tina gave herself up in complete submission to her mistress's hands, moaning faintly. Belesa felt as if her world had fallen about her ears. She was sick and bewildered, overwrought, her nerves quivering from the brutal shock of what she had witnessed. Fear of and hatred for her uncle grew in her soul. She had never loved him; he was harsh and apparently without natural affection, grasping and avid. But she had considered him just, and fearless. Revulsion shook her at the memory of his staring eyes and bloodless face. It was some terrible fear which had roused this frenzy; and because of this fear Valenso had brutalized the only creature she had to love and cherish; because of that fear he was selling her, his niece, to an infamous outlaw. What was behind this madness? Who was the black man Tina had seen?

The child muttered in semi-delirium.

'I did not lie, my Lady! Indeed I did not! It was a black man, in a black boat that burned like blue fire on the water! A tall man, black as a negro, and wrapped in a black cloak! I was afraid when I saw him, and my blood ran cold. He left his boat on the sands and went into the forest. Why did the Count whip me for seeing him?'

'Hush, Tina,' soothed Belesa. 'Lie quiet. The smarting will soon pass.'

The door opened behind her and she whirled, snatching up a jeweled dagger. The Count stood in the door, and her flesh crawled at the sight. He looked years older; his face was grey and drawn, and his eyes stared in a way that roused fear in her bosom. She had never been close to him; now she felt as though a gulf separated them. He was not her uncle who stood there, but a stranger come to menace her.

She lifted the dagger.

'If you touch her again,' she whispered from dry lips, 'I swear before Mitra I will sink this blade in your breast.'

He did not heed her.

'I have posted a strong guard about the manor,' he said. 'Zarono brings his men into the stockade tomorrow. He will not sail until he has found the treasure. When he finds it we shall sail at once for some port not yet decided upon.'

'And you will sell me to him?' she whispered. 'In Mitra's name—'

He fixed upon her a gloomy gaze in which all considerations but his own self-interest had been crowded out. She shrank before it, seeing in it the frantic cruelty that possessed the man in his mysterious fear.

'You will do as I command,' he said presently, with no more human feeling in his voice than there is in the ring of flint on steel. And turning, he left the chamber. Blinded by a sudden rush of horror, Belesa fell fainting beside the couch where Tina lay.

4 A Black Drum Droning

Belesa never knew how long she lay crushed and senseless. She was first aware of Tina's arms about her and the sobbing of the child in her ear. Mechanically she straightened herself and drew the girl into her arms; and she sat there, dry-eyed, staring unseeingly at the flickering candle. There was no sound in the castle. The singing of the buccaneers on the strand had ceased. Dully, almost impersonally she reviewed her problem.

Valenso was mad, driven frantic by the story of the mysterious black man. It was to escape this stranger that he wished to abandon the settlement and flee with Zarono. That much was obvious. Equally obvious was the fact that he was ready to sacrifice her in exchange for that opportunity to escape. In the blackness of spirit which surrounded her she saw no glint of light. The serving men were dull or callous brutes, their women stupid and apathetic. They would neither dare nor care to help her. She was utterly helpless.

Tina lifted her tear-stained face as if she were listening to the prompting of some inner voice. The child's understanding of Belesa's inmost thoughts was almost uncanny, as was her recognition of the inexorable drive of Fate and the only alternative left to the weak.

'We must go, my Lady!' she whispered. 'Zarono shall not have you. Let us go far away into the forest. We shall go until we can go no further, and then we shall lie down and die together.'

The tragic strength that is the last refuge of the weak entered Belesa's soul. It was the only escape from the shadows that had been closing in upon her since that day when they fled from Zingara.

'We shall go, child.'

She rose and was fumbling for a cloak, when an exclamation from Tina brought her about. The girl was on her feet, a finger pressed to her lips, her eyes wide and bright with terror.

'What is it, Tina?' The child's expression of fright induced Belesa to pitch her voice to a whisper, and a nameless apprehension crawled over her.

'Someone outside in the hall,' whispered Tina, clutching her arm convulsively. 'He stopped at our door, and then went on, toward the Count's chamber at the other end.'

'Your ears are keener than mine,' murmured Belesa. 'But there is nothing strange in that. It was the Count himself, perchance, or Galbro.' She moved to open the door, but Tina threw her arms frantically about her neck, and Belesa felt the wild beating of her heart.

'No, no, my Lady! Do not open the door! I am afraid! I do not know why, but I feel that some evil thing is skulking near us!'

Impressed, Belesa patted her reassuringly, and reached a hand toward the gold disk that masked the tiny peep-hole in the center of the door.

'He is coming back!' shivered the girl. 'I hear him!'

Belesa heard something too - a curious stealthy pad which she knew, with a chill of nameless fear, was not the step of anyone she knew. Nor was it the step of Zarono, or any booted man. Could it be the buccaneer gliding along the hallway on bare, stealthy feet, to slay his host while he slept? She remembered the soldiers who would be on guard below. If the buccaneer had remained in the manor for the night, a man-at-arms would be posted before his chamber door. But who was that sneaking along the corridor? None slept upstairs besides herself, Tina and the Count, except Galbro.

With a quick motion she extinguished the candle so it would not shine through the hole in the door, and pushed aside the gold disk. All the lights were out in the hall, which was ordinarily lighted by candles. Someone was moving along the darkened corridor. She sensed rather than saw a dim bulk moving past her doorway, but she could make nothing of its shape except that it was man-like. But a chill wave of terror swept over her; so she crouched dumb, incapable of the scream that froze behind her lips. It was not such terror as her uncle now inspired in her, or fear like her fear of Zarono, or even of the brooding forest. It was blind unreasoning terror that laid an icy hand on her soul and froze her tongue to her palate.

The figure passed on to the stairhead, where it was limned momentarily against the faint glow that came up from below, and at the glimpse of that vague black image against the red, she almost fainted.

She crouched there in the darkness, awaiting the outcry that would announce that the soldiers in the great hall had seen the intruder. But the manor remained silent; somewhere a wind wailed shrilly. That was all.

Belesa's hands were moist with perspiration as she groped to relight the candle. She was still shaken with horror, though she could not decide just what there had been about that black figure etched against the red glow that had roused this frantic loathing in her soul. It was man-like in shape, but the outline was strangely alien - abnormal - though she could not clearly define that abnormality. But she knew that it was no human being that she had seen, and she knew that the sight had robbed her of all her new-found resolution. She was demoralized, incapable of action.

The candle flared up, limning Tina's white face in the yellow glow.

'It was the black man!' whispered Tina. 'I know! My blood turned cold, just as it did when I saw him on the beach. There are soldiers downstairs; why did they not see him? Shall we go and inform the Count?'

Belesa shook her head. She did not care to repeat the scene that had ensued upon Tina's first mention of the black man. At any event, she dared not venture out into that darkened hallway.

'We dare not go into the forest!' shuddered Tina. 'He will be lurking there—'

Belesa did not ask the girl how she knew the black man would be in the forest; it was the logical hiding-place for any evil thing, man or devil. And she knew Tina was right; they dared not leave the fort now. Her determination, which had not faltered at the prospect of certain death, gave way at the thought of traversing those gloomy woods with that black shambling creature at large among them. Helplessly she sat down and sank her face in her hands.

Tina slept, presently, on the couch, whimpering occasionally in her sleep. Tears sparkled on her long lashes. She moved her smarting body uneasily in her restless slumber. Toward dawn Belesa was aware of a stifling quality in the atmosphere. She heard a low rumble of thunder somewhere off to sea-ward. Extinguishing the candle, which had burned to its socket, she went to a window whence she could see both the ocean and a belt of the forest behind the fort.

The fog had disappeared, but out to sea a dusky mass was rising from the horizon. From it lightning flickered and the low thunder growled. An answering rumble came from the black woods. Startled, she turned and stared at the forest, a brooding black rampart. A strange rhythmic pulsing came to her ears - a droning reverberation that was not the roll of a Pictish drum.

'The drum!' sobbed Tina, spasmodically opening and closing her fingers in her sleep. 'The black man - beating on a black drum - in the black woods! Oh, save us—!'

Belesa shuddered. Along the eastern horizon ran a thin white line that presaged dawn. But that black cloud on the western rim writhed and billowed, swelling and expanding. She stared in amazement, for storms were practically unknown on that coast at that time of the year, and she had never seen a cloud like that one.

It came pouring up over the world-rim in great boiling masses of blackness, veined with fire. It rolled and billowed with the wind in its belly. Its thundering made the air vibrate. And another sound mingled awesomely with the reverberations of the thunder - the voice of the wind, that raced before its coming. The inky horizon was torn and convulsed in the lightning flashes; afar to sea she saw the white-capped waves racing before the wind. She heard its droning roar, increasing in volume as it swept shoreward. But as yet no wind stirred on the land. The air was hot, breathless. There was a sensation of unreality about the contrast: out there wind and thunder and chaos sweeping inland; but here stifling stillness. Somewhere below her a shutter slammed, startling in the tense silence, and a woman's voice was lifted, shrill with alarm. But most of the people of the fort seemed sleeping, unaware of the oncoming hurricane.

She realized that she still heard that mysterious droning drum-beat and she stared toward the black forest, her flesh crawling. She could see nothing, but some obscure instinct or intuition prompted her to visualize a black hideous figure squatting under black branches and enacting a nameless incantation on something that sounded like a drum—

Desperately she shook off the ghoulish conviction, and looked sea-ward, as a blaze of lightning fairly split the sky. Outlined against its glare she saw the masts of Zarono's ship; she saw the tents of the buccaneers on the beach, the sandy ridges of the south point and the rock cliffs of the north point as plainly as by midday sun. Louder and louder rose the roar of the wind, and now the manor was awake. Feet came pounding up the stair, and Zarono's voice yelled, edged with fright.

Doors slammed and Valenso answered him, shouting to be heard above the roar of the elements.

'Why didn't you warn me of a storm from the west?' howled the buccaneer. 'If the anchors don't hold—'

'A storm never came from the west before, at this time of year!' shrieked Valenso, rushing from his chamber in his nightshirt, his face livid and his hair standing stiffly on end. 'This is the work of—' His words were drowned as he raced madly up the ladder that led to the lookout tower, followed by the swearing buccaneer.

Belesa crouched at her window, awed and deafened. Louder and louder rose the wind, until it drowned all other sound - all except that maddening droning that now rose like an inhuman chant of triumph. It roared inshore, driving before it a foaming league-long crest of white - and then all hell and destruction was loosed on that coast. Rain fell in driving torrents, sweeping the beaches with blind frenzy. The wind hit like a thunder-clap,

making the timbers of the fort quiver. The surf roared over the sands, drowning the coals of the fires the seamen had built. In the glare of lightning Belesa saw, through the curtain of the slashing rain, the tents of the buccaneers whipped to ribbons and washed away, saw the men themselves staggering toward the fort, beaten almost to the sands by the fury of torrent and blast.

And limned against the blue glare she saw Zaronó's ship, ripped loose from her moorings, driven headlong against the jagged cliffs that jutted up to receive her ...

5 A Man From the Wilderness

The storm had spent its fury. Full dawn rose in a clear blue rain-washed sky. As the sun rose in a blaze of fresh gold, bright-hued birds lifted a swelling chorus from the trees on whose broad leaves beads of water sparkled like diamonds, quivering in the gentle morning breeze.

At a small stream which wound over the sands to join the sea, hidden beyond a fringe of trees and bushes, a man bent to lave his hands and face. He performed his ablutions after the manner of his race, grunting lustily and splashing like a buffalo. But in the midst of these splashing he lifted his head suddenly, his tawny hair dripping and water running in rivulets over his brawny shoulders. He crouched in a listening attitude for a split second, then was on his feet and facing inland, sword in hand, all in one motion. And there he froze, glaring wide-mouthed.

A man as big as himself was striding toward him over the sands, making no attempt at stealth; and the pirate's eyes widened as he stared at the close-fitting silk breeches, high flaring-topped boots, wide-skirted coat and head-gear of a hundred years ago. There was a broad cutlass in the stranger's hand and unmistakable purpose in his approach.

The pirate went pale, as recognition blazed in his eyes.

'You!' he ejaculated unbelievably. 'By Mitra! You!'

Oaths streamed from his lips as he heaved up his cutlass. The birds rose in flaming showers from the trees as the clang of steel interrupted their song. Blue sparks flew from the hacking blades, and the sand grated and ground under the stamping boot heels. Then the clash of steel ended in a chopping crunch, and one man went to his knees with a choking gasp. The hilt escaped his nerveless hand and he slid full-length on the sand which reddened with his blood. With a dying effort he fumbled at his girdle and drew something from it, tried to lift it to his mouth, and then stiffened convulsively and went limp.

The conqueror bent and ruthlessly tore the stiffening fingers from the object they crumpled in their desperate grasp.

Zarono and Valenso stood on the beach, staring at the driftwood their men were gathering - spars, pieces of masts, broken timbers. So savagely had the storm hammered Zaronó's ship against the low cliffs that most of the salvage was match-wood. A short distance behind them stood Belesa, listening to their conversation, one arm about Tina. The girl was pale and listless, apathetic to whatever Fate held in store for her. She heard what the men said, but with little interest. She was crushed by the realization that she was but a pawn in the game, however it was to be played out - whether it was to be a wretched life dragged out on that desolate coast, or a return, effected somehow, to some civilized land.

Zarono cursed venomously, but Valenso seemed dazed.

'This is not the time of year for storms from the west,' he muttered, staring with haggard eyes at the men dragging the wreckage up on the beach. 'It was not chance that brought that storm out of the deep to splinter the ship in which I meant to escape. Escape? I am caught like a rat in a trap, as it was meant. Nay, we are all trapped rats—'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' snarled Zaronó, giving a vicious yank at his mustache. 'I've been unable to get any sense out of you since that flaxen-haired slut upset you last night with her wild tale of black men coming out of the sea. But I do know that I'm not going to spend my life on this cursed coast. Ten of my men went to hell in the ship, but I've got a hundred and sixty more. You've got a hundred. There are tools in your fort, and plenty of trees in yonder forest. We'll build a ship. I'll set men to cutting down trees as soon as they get this drift dragged up out of the reach of the waves.'

'It will take months,' muttered Valenso.

'Well, is there any better way in which we could employ our time? We're here - and unless we build a ship we'll never get away. We'll have to rig up some kind of a sawmill, but I've never encountered anything yet that balked me long. I hope that storm smashed Strom to bits - the Argossean dog! While we're building the ship we'll hunt for old Trancos' loot.'

'We will never complete your ship,' said Valenso somberly.

'You fear the Picts? We have enough men to defy them.'

'I do not speak of the Picts. I speak of a black man.'

Zaronó turned on him angrily. 'Will you talk sense? Who is this accursed black man?'

'Accursed indeed,' said Valenso, staring sea-ward. 'A shadow of mine own red-stained past risen up to hound me to hell. Because of him I fled Zingara, hoping to lose my trail in the great ocean. But I should have known he would smell me out at last.'

'If such a man came ashore he must be hiding in the woods,' growled Zaronó. 'We'll rake the forest and hunt him out.'

Valenso laughed harshly.

'Seek for a shadow that drifts before a cloud that hides the moon; grope in the dark for a cobra; follow a mist that steals out the swamp at midnight.'

Zarono cast him an uncertain look, obviously doubting his sanity.

'Who is this man? Have done with ambiguity.'

'The shadow of my own mad cruelty and ambition; a horror came out of the lost ages; no man of mortal flesh and blood, but—'

'Sail ho!' bawled the lookout on the north point.

Zarono wheeled and his voice slashed the wind.

'Do you know her?'

'Aye!' the reply came back faintly. 'It's the Red Hand!'

Zarono cursed like a wild man.

'Strom! The devil takes care of his own! How could he ride out that blow?' The buccaneer's voice rose to a yell that carried up and down the strand. 'Back to the fort, you dogs!'

Before the Red Hand, somewhat battered in appearance, nosed around the point, the beach was bare of human life, the palisade bristling with helmets and scarf-bound heads. The buccaneers accepted the alliance with the easy adaptability of adventurers, the henchmen with the apathy of serfs.

Zarono ground his teeth as a longboat swung leisurely in to the beach, and he sighted the tawny head of his rival in the bow. The boat grounded, and Strom strode toward the fort alone.

Some distance away he halted and shouted in a bull's bellow that carried clearly in the still morning. 'Ahoy, the fort! I want to parley!'

'Well, why in hell don't you?' snarled Zarono.

'The last time I approached under a flag of truce an arrow broke on my brisket!' roared the pirate. 'I want a promise it won't happen again!'

'You have my promise!' called Zarono sardonically.

'Damn your promise, you Zingaran dog! I want Valenso's word.'

A measure of dignity remained to the Count. There was an edge of authority to his voice as he answered: 'Advance, but keep your men back. You will not be fired upon.'

'That's enough for me,' said Strom instantly. 'Whatever a Korzetta's sins, once his word is given, you can trust him.'

He strode forward and halted under the gate, laughing at the hate-darkened visage Zarono thrust over at him.

'Well, Zarono,' he taunted, 'you are a ship shorter than you were when I last I saw you! But you Zingarans never were sailors.'

'How did you save your ship, you Messantian gutter-scum?' snarled the buccaneer.

'There's a cove some miles to the north protected by a high-ridged arm of land that broke the force of the gale,' answered Strom. 'I was anchored behind it. My anchors dragged, but they held me off the shore.'

Zarono scowled blackly. Valenso said nothing. He had not known of that cove. He had done scant exploring of his domain. Fear of the Picts and lack of curiosity had kept him and his men near the fort. The Zingarans were by nature neither explorers nor colonists.

'I come to make a trade,' said Strom, easily. 'We've naught to trade with you save sword-strokes,' growled Zarono.

'I think otherwise,' grinned Strom, thin-lipped. 'You tipped your hand when you murdered Galacus, my first mate, and robbed him. Until this morning I supposed that Valenso had Tranicos' treasure. But if either of you had it, you wouldn't have gone to the trouble of following me and killing my mate to get the map.'

'The map?' Zarono ejaculated, stiffening.

'Oh, don't dissemble!' laughed Strom, but anger blazed blue in his eyes. 'I know you have it. Picts don't wear boots!'

'But—' began the Count, nonplussed, but fell silent as Zarono nudged him.

'And if we have the map,' said Zarono, 'what have you to trade that we might require?'

'Let me come into the fort,' suggested Strom. 'There we can talk.'

He was not so obvious as to glance at the men peering at them from along the wall, but his two listeners understood. And so did the men. Strom had a ship. That fact would figure in any bargaining, or battle. But it would carry just so many, regardless of who commanded; whoever sailed away in it, there would be some left behind. A wave of tense speculation ran along the silent throng at the palisade.

'Your men will stay where they are,' warned Zarono, indicating both the boat drawn up on the beach, and the ship anchored out in the bay.

'Aye. But don't get the idea that you can seize me and hold me for a hostage!' He laughed grimly. 'I want Valenso's word that I'll be allowed to leave the fort alive and unhurt within the hour, whether we come to terms or not.'

'You have my pledge,' answered the Count.

'All right, then. Open that gate and let's talk plainly.'

The gate opened and closed, the leaders vanished from sight, and the common men of both parties resumed their silent surveillance of each other: the men on the palisade, and the men squatting beside their boat, with a broad stretch of sand between; and beyond a strip of blue water, the carack, with steel caps glinting all along her rail.

On the broad stair, above the great hall, Belesa and Tina crouched, ignored by the men below. These sat about the broad table: Valenso, Galbro, Zarono and Strom. But for them the hall was empty.

Strom gulped wine and set the empty goblet on the table.

The frankness suggested by his bluff countenance was belied by the dancing lights of cruelty and treachery in his wide eyes. But he spoke bluntly enough.

'We all want the treasure old Trancos hid somewhere near this bay,' he said abruptly. 'Each has something the others need. Valenso has laborers, supplies, and a stockade to shelter us from the Picts. You, Zarono, have my map. I have a ship.'

'What I'd like to know,' remarked Zarono, 'is this: if you've had that map all these years, why haven't you come after the loot sooner?'

'I didn't have it. It was that dog, Zingelito, who knifed the old miser in the dark and stole the map. But he had neither ship nor crew, and it took him more than a year to get them. When he did come after the treasure, the Picts prevented his landing, and his men mutinied and made him sail back to Zingara. One of them stole the map from him, and recently sold it to me.'

'That was why Zingelito recognized the bay,' muttered Valenso.

'Did that dog lead you here, Count? I might have guessed it. Where is he?'

'Doubtless in hell, since he was once a buccaneer. The Picts slew him, evidently while he was searching in the woods for the treasure.'

'Good!' approved Strom heartily. 'Well, I don't know how you knew my mate was carrying the map. I trusted him, and the men trusted him more than they did me, so I let him keep it. But this morning he wandered inland with some of the others, got separated from them, and we found him sworded to death near the beach, and the map gone. The men were ready to accuse me of killing him, but I showed the fools the tracks left by his slayer, and proved to them that my feet wouldn't fit them. And I knew it wasn't any one of the crew, because none of them wear boots that make that sort of track. And Picts don't wear boots at all. So it had to be a Zingaran.'

'Well, you've got the map, but you haven't got the treasure. If you had it, you wouldn't have let me inside the stockade. I've got you penned up in this fort. You can't get out to look for the loot, and even if you did get it, you have no ship to get away in.'

'Now here's my proposal: Zarono, give me the map. And you, Valenso, give me fresh meat and other supplies. My men are nigh to scurvy after the long voyage. In return I'll take you three men, the Lady Belesa and her girl, and set you ashore within reach of some Zingaran port - or I'll put Zarono ashore near some buccaneer rendezvous if he prefers, since doubtless a noose awaits him in Zingara. And to clinch the bargain I'll give each of you a handsome share in the treasure.'

The buccaneer tugged his mustache meditatively. He knew that Strom would not keep any such pact, if made. Nor did Zarono even consider agreeing to his proposal. But to refuse bluntly would be to force the issue into a clash of arms. He sought his agile brain for a plan to outwit the pirate. He wanted Strom's ship as avidly as he desired the lost treasure.

'What's to prevent us from holding you captive and forcing your men to give us your ship in exchange for you?' he asked.

Strom laughed at him.

'Do you think I'm a fool? My men have orders to heave up the anchors and sail hence if I don't reappear within the hour, or if they suspect treachery. They wouldn't give you the ship, if you skinned me alive on the beach. Besides, I have the Count's word.'

'My pledge is not straw,' said Valenso somberly. 'Have done with threats, Zarono.'

Zarono did not reply, his mind wholly absorbed in the problem of getting possession of Strom's ship; of continuing the parley without betraying the fact that he did not have the map. He wondered who in Mitra's name did have the accursed map.

'Let me take my men away with me on your ship when we sail,' he said. 'I can not desert my faithful followers—'

Strom snorted.

'Why don't you ask for my cutlass to slit my gullet with? Desert your faithful - bah! You'd desert your brother to the devil if you could gain anything by it. No! You're not going to bring enough men aboard to give you a chance to mutiny and take my ship.'

'Give us a day to think it over,' urged Zarono, fighting for time.

Strom's heavy fist banged on the table, making the wine dance in the glasses.

'No, by Mitra! Give me my answer now!'

Zarono was on his feet, his black rage submerging his craftiness.

'You Barachan dog! I'll give you your answer - in your guts—'

He tore aside his cloak, caught at his sword-hilt. Strom heaved up with a roar, his chair crashing backward to the floor. Valenso sprang up, spreading his arms between them as they faced one another across the board, jutting jaws close together, blades half drawn, faces convulsed.

'Gentlemen, have done! Zarono, he has my pledge—'

'The foul fiends gnaw your pledge!' snarled Zarono.

'Stand from between us, my Lord,' growled the pirate, his voice thick with the killing lust. 'Your word was that I should not be treacherously treated. It shall be considered no violation of your pledge for this dog and me to cross swords in equal play.'

'Well spoken, Strom!' It was a deep, powerful voice behind them, vibrant with grim amusement. All wheeled and glared, open-mouthed. Up on the stair Belesa started up with an involuntary exclamation.

A man strode out from the hangings that masked a chamber door, and advanced toward the table without haste or hesitation. Instantly he dominated the group, and all felt the situation subtly charged with a new, dynamic atmosphere.

The stranger was as tall as either of the freebooters, and more powerfully built than either, yet for all his size he moved with pantherish suppleness in his high, flaring-topped boots. His thighs were cased in close-fitting breeches of white silk, his wide-skirted sky-blue coat open to reveal an open-necked white silken shirt beneath, and the scarlet sash that girdled his waist. There were silver acorn-shaped buttons on the coat, and it was adorned with gilt-worked cuffs and pocket-flaps, and a satin collar. A lacquered hat completed a costume obsolete by nearly a hundred years. A heavy cutlass hung at the wearer's hip.

'Conan!' ejaculated both freebooters together, and Valenso and Galbro caught their breath at that name.

'Who else?' The giant strode up to the table, laughing sardonically at their amazement.

'What - what do you here?' stuttered the seneschal. 'How come you here, uninvited and unannounced?'

'I climbed the palisade on the east side while you fools were arguing at the gate,' Conan answered. 'Every man in the fort was craning his neck westward. I entered the manor while Strom was being let in at the gate. I've been in that chamber there ever since, eavesdropping.'

'I thought you were dead,' said Zarono slowly. 'Three years ago the shattered hull of your ship was sighted off a reefy coast, and you were heard of on the Main no more.'

'I didn't drown with my crew,' answered Conan. 'It'll take a bigger ocean than that one to drown me.'

Up on the stair Tina was clutching Belesa in her excitement and staring through the balustrades with all her eyes.

'Conan! My Lady, it is Conan! Look! Oh, look!'

Belesa was looking; it was like encountering a legendary character in the flesh. Who of all the sea-folk had not heard the wild, bloody tales told of Conan, the wild rover who had once been a captain of the Barachan pirates, and one of the greatest scourges of the sea? A score of ballads celebrated his ferocious and audacious exploits. The man could not be ignored; irresistibly he had stalked into the scene, to form another, dominant element in the tangled plot. And in the midst of her frightened fascination, Belesa's feminine instinct prompted the speculation as to Conan's attitude toward her - would it be like Strom's brutal indifference, or Zarono's violent desire?

Valenso was recovering from the shock of finding a stranger within his very hall. He knew Conan was a Cimmerian, born and bred in the wastes of the far north, and therefore not amenable to the physical limitations which controlled civilized men. It was not so strange that he had been able to enter the fort undetected, but Valenso flinched at the reflection that other barbarians might duplicate that feat - the dark, silent Picts, for instance.

'What do you want here?' he demanded. 'Did you come from the sea?'

'I came from the woods.' The Cimmerian jerked his head toward the east.

'You have been living with the Picts?' Valenso asked coldly.

A momentary anger flickered bluey in the giant's eyes. 'Even a Zingaran ought to know there's never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be,' he retorted with an oath. 'Our feud with them is older than the world. If you'd said that to one of my wilder brothers, you'd have found yourself with a split head. But I've lived among you civilized men long enough to understand your ignorance and lack of common courtesy - the churlishness that demands his business of a man who appears at your door out of a thousand-mile wilderness. Never mind that.' He turned to the two freebooters who stood staring glumly at him.

'From what I overheard,' quoth he, 'I gather there is some dissension over a map!'

'That is none of your affair,' growled Strom.

'Is this it?' Conan grinned wickedly and drew from his pocket a crumpled object - a square of parchment, marked with crimson lines.

Strom stared violently, paling. 'My map!' he ejaculated. 'Where did you get it?'

'From your mate, Galacus, when I killed him,' answered Conan with grim enjoyment.

'You dog!' raved Strom, turning on Zaron. 'You never had the map! You lied—'

'I didn't say I had it,' snarled Zaron. 'You deceived yourself. Don't be a fool. Conan is alone. If he had a crew he'd have already cut our throats. We'll take the map from him—'

'You'll never touch it!' Conan laughed fiercely. Both men sprang at him, cursing. Stepping back he crumpled the parchment and cast it into the glowing coals of the fireplace. With an incoherent bellow Strom lunged past him, to be met with a buffet under the ear that stretched him half-senseless on the floor. Zaron whipped out his sword but before he could thrust, Conan's cutlass beat it out of his hand.

Zaron staggered against the table, with all hell in his eyes. Strom dragged himself erect, his eyes glazed, blood dripping from his bruised ear. Conan leaned slightly over the table, his outstretched cutlass just touched the breast of Count Valenso.

'Don't call for your soldiers, Count,' said the Cimmerian softly. 'Not a sound out of you - or from you, either, dog-face!'

His name for Galbro, who showed no intention of braving his wrath. 'The map's burned to ashes, and it'll do no good to spill blood. Sit down, all of you.'

Strom hesitated, made an abortive gesture toward his hilt, then shrugged his shoulders and sank sullenly into a chair. The others followed suit. Conan remained standing, towering over the table, while his enemies watched him with bitter eyes of hate.

'You were bargaining,' he said. 'That's all I've come to do.'

'And what have you to trade?' sneered Zaron.

'The treasure of Tranicos!'

'What?' All four men were on their feet, leaning toward him.

'Sit down!' he roared, banging his broad blade on the table. They sank back, tense and white with excitement.

He grinned in huge enjoyment of the sensation his words had caused.

'Yes! I found it before I got the map. That's why I burned the map. I don't need it. And now nobody will ever find it, unless I show him where it is.'

They stared at him with murder in their eyes.

'You're lying,' said Zarono without conviction. 'You've told us one lie already. You said you came from the woods, yet you say you haven't been living with the Picts. All men know this country is a wilderness, inhabited only by savages. The nearest outposts of civilization are the Aquilonian settlements on Thunder River, hundreds of miles to eastward.'

'That's where I came from,' replied Conan imperturbably. 'I believe I'm the first white man to cross the Pictish Wilderness. I crossed Thunder River to follow a raiding party that had been harrying the frontier. I followed them deep into the wilderness, and killed their chief, but was knocked senseless by a stone from a sling during the melee, and the dogs captured me alive. They were Wolfmen, but they traded me to the Eagle clan in return for a chief of theirs the Eagles had captured. The Eagles carried me nearly a hundred miles westward to burn me in their chief village, but I killed their war-chief and three or four others one night, and broke away.'

'I couldn't turn back. They were behind me, and kept herding me westward. A few days ago I shook them off, and by Crom, the place where I took refuge turned out to be the treasure trove of old Tranicos! I found it all: chests of garments and weapons - that's where I got these clothes and this blade - heaps of coins and gems and gold ornaments, and in the midst of all, the jewels of Tothmekri gleaming like frozen starlight! And old Tranicos and his eleven captains sitting about an ebon table and staring at the board, as they've stared for a hundred years!'

'What?'

'Aye!' he laughed. 'Tranicos died in the midst of his treasure, and all with him! Their bodies have not rotted nor shriveled. They sit there in their high boots and skirted coats and lacquered hats, with their wineglasses in their stiff hands, just as they have sat for a century!'

'That's an unchancy thing!' muttered Strom uneasily, but Zarono snarled: 'What boots it? It's the treasure we want. Go on, Conan.'

Conan seated himself at the board, filled a goblet and quaffed it before he answered.

'The first wine I've drunk since I left Conawaga, by Crom! Those cursed Eagles hunted me so closely through the forest I had hardly time to munch the nuts and roots I found. Sometimes I caught frogs and ate them raw because I dared not light a fire.'

His impatient hearers informed him profanely that they were not interested in his adventures prior to finding the treasure.

He grinned hardily and resumed: 'Well, after I stumbled onto the trove I lay up and rested a few days, and made snares to catch rabbits, and let my wounds heal. I saw smoke against the western sky, but thought it some Pictish village on the beach. I lay close, but as it happens, the loot's hidden in a place the Picts shun. If any spied on me, they didn't show themselves.

'Last night I started westward, intending to strike the beach some miles north of the spot where I'd seen the smoke. I wasn't far from the shore when that storm hit. I took shelter under the lee of a rock and waited until it had blown itself out. Then I climbed a tree to look for Picts, and from it I saw your carack at anchor, Strom, and your men coming in to shore. I was making my way toward your camp on the beach when I met Galacus. I shoved a sword through him because there was an old feud between us. I wouldn't have known he had a map, if he hadn't tried to eat it before he died.

'I recognized it for what it was, of course, and was considering what use I could make of it, when the rest of you dogs came up and found the body. I was lying in a thicket not a dozen yards from you while you were arguing with your men over the matter. I judged the time wasn't ripe for me to show myself then!'

He laughed at the rage and chagrin displayed in Strom's face.

'Well, while I lay there, listening to your talk, I got a drift of the situation, and learned, from the things you let fall, that Zaronno and Valenso were a few miles south of the beach. So when I heard you say that Zaronno must have done the killing and taken the map, and that you meant to go and parley with him, seeking an opportunity to murder him and get it back—'

'Dog!' snarled Zaronno. Strom was livid, but he laughed mirthlessly.

'Do you think I'd play fairly with a treacherous dog like you? - Go on, Conan.'

The Cimmerian grinned. It was evident that he was deliberately fanning the fires of hate between the two men.

'Nothing much, then. I came straight through the woods while you tacked along the coast, and raised the fort before you did. Your guess that the storm had destroyed Zaronno's ship was a good one - but then, you knew the configuration of this bay.

'Well, there's the story. I have the treasure, Strom has a ship. Valenso has supplies. By Crom, Zaronno, I don't see where you fit into the scheme, but to avoid strife I'll include you. My proposal is simple enough.

'We'll split the treasure four ways. Strom and I will sail away with our shares aboard the Red Hand. You and Valenso take yours and remain lords of the wilderness, or build a ship out of tree trunks, as you wish.'

Valenso blanched and Zaronno swore, while Strom grinned quietly.

'Are you fool enough to go aboard the Red Hand alone with Strom?' snarled Zaronno. 'He'll cut your throat before you're out of sight of land!'

Conan laughed with genuine enjoyment. 'This is like the problem of the sheep, the wolf and the cabbage,' he admitted. 'How to get them across the river without their devouring each other!'

'And that appeals to your Cimmerian sense of humor,' complained Zaronno.

'I will not stay here!' cried Valenso, a wild gleam in his dark eyes. 'Treasure or no treasure, I must go!'

Conan gave him a slit-eyed glance of speculation. 'Well, then,' said he, 'how about this plan: we divide the loot as I suggested. Then Strom sails away with Zaronno, Valenso, and such members of the Count's household as he may select, leaving me in command of the fort and the rest of Valenso's men, and all of Zaronno's. I'll build my own ship.' Zaronno looked slightly sick.

'I have the choice of remaining here in exile, or abandoning my crew and going alone on the Red Hand to have my throat cut?'

Conan's laughter rang gustily through the hall, and he smote Zaronno jovially on the back, ignoring the black murder in the buccaneer's glare.

'That's it, Zaronno!' quoth he. 'Stay here while Strom and I sail away, or sail away with Strom, leaving your men with me.'

'I'd rather have Zaronno,' said Strom frankly. 'You'd turn my own men against me, Conan, and cut my throat before I raised the Barachans.'

Sweat dripped from Zaronno's livid face. 'Neither I, the Count, nor his niece will ever reach the land alive if we ship with that devil,' said he. 'You are both in my power in this hall. My men surround it. What's to prevent me cutting you both down?'

'Not a thing,' Conan admitted cheerfully. 'Except the fact that if you do Strom's men will sail away and leave you stranded on this coast where the Picts will presently cut all your throats; and the fact that with me dead you'll never find the treasure; and the fact that I'll split your skull down to your chin if you try to summon your men.'

Conan laughed as he spoke, as if at some whimsical situation, but even Belesa sensed that he meant what he said. His naked cutlass lay across his knees, and Zaronno's sword was under the table, out of the buccaneer's reach. Galbro was not a fighting man, and Valenso seemed incapable of decision or action.

'Aye!' said Strom with an oath. 'You'd find the two of us no easy prey. I'm agreeable to Conan's proposal. What do you say,

'I must leave this coast!' whispered Valenso, staring blankly. 'I must hasten - I must go - go far - quickly!'

Strom frowned, puzzled at the Count's stranger manner and turned to Zarono, grinning wickedly: 'And you Zarono?'

'What can I say?' snarled Zarono. 'Let me take my three officers and forty men aboard the Red Hand, and the bargain's made.'

The officers and thirty men!

There was no shaking of hands, or ceremonial drinking of wine to seal the pact. The two captains glared at each other like hungry wolves. The Count plucked his mustache with a trembling hand, rapt in his own somber thoughts. Conan stretched like a great cat, drank wine, and grinned on the assemblage, but it was the sinister grin of a stalking tiger. Belesa sensed the murderous purposes that reigned there, the treacherous intent that dominated each man's mind. Not one had any intention of keeping his part of the pact, Valenso possibly excluded. Each of the freebooters intended to possess both the ship and the entire treasure. Neither would be satisfied with less. But how? What was going on in each crafty mind? Belesa felt oppressed and stifled by the atmosphere of hatred and treachery. The Cimmerian, for all his ferocious frankness, was no less subtle than the others - and even fiercer. His domination of the situation was not physical alone, though his gigantic shoulders and massive limbs seemed too big even for the great hall. There was an iron vitality about the man that overshadowed even the hard vigor of the other freebooters.

'Lead us to the treasure!' Zarono demanded.

'Wait a bit,' answered Conan. 'We must keep our power evenly balanced, so one can't take advantage of the others. We'll work it this way: Strom's men will come ashore, all but half a dozen or so, and camp on the beach. Zarono's men will come out of the fort, and likewise camp on the strand, within easy sight of them. Then each crew can keep a check on the other, to see that nobody slips after us who go after the treasure, to ambush any of us. Those left aboard the Red Hand will take her out into the bay out of reach of either party. Valenso's men will stay in the fort, but will leave the gate open. Will you come with us, Count?'

'Go into that forest?' Valenso shuddered, and drew his cloak about his shoulders. 'Not for all the gold of Tranicos!'

'All right. It'll take about thirty men to carry the loot. We'll take fifteen from each crew and start as soon as possible.'

Belesa, keenly alert to every angle of the drama being played out beneath her, saw Zarono and Strom shoot furtive glances at one another, then lower their gaze quickly as they lifted their glasses to hide the murky intent in their eyes. Belesa saw the fatal weakness in Conan's plan, and wondered how he could have overlooked it. Perhaps he was too arrogantly confident in his personal prowess. But she knew that he would never come out of that forest alive. Once the treasure was in their grasp, the others would form a rogues'

alliance long enough to rid themselves of the man both hated. She shuddered, staring morbidly at the man she knew was doomed; strange to see that powerful fighting man sitting there, laughing and swilling wine, in full prime and power, and to know that he was already doomed to a bloody death.

The whole situation was pregnant with dark and bloody portents. Zaronno would trick and kill Strom if he could, and she knew that Strom had already marked Zaronno for death, and doubtless, also, her uncle and herself. If Zaronno won the final battle of cruel wits, their lives were safe - but looking at the buccaneer as he sat there chewing his mustache, with all the stark evil of his nature showing naked in his dark face, she could not decide which was more abhorrent - death or Zaronno. 'How far is it?' demanded Strom.

'If we start within the hour we can be back before midnight,' answered Conan. He emptied his glass, rose, adjusted his girdle, and glanced at the Count.

'Valenso,' he said, 'are you mad, to kill a Pict in his hunting paint?'

Valenso started.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you mean to say you don't know that your men killed a Pict hunter in the woods last night?'

The Count shook his head.

'None of my men was in the woods last night.'

'Well, somebody was,' grunted the Cimmerian, fumbling in a pocket. 'I saw his head nailed to a tree near the edge of the forest. He wasn't painted for war. I didn't find any boot-tracks, from which I judged that it had been nailed up there before the storm. But there were plenty of other signs - moccasin tracks on the wet ground. Picts have been there and seen that head. They were men of some other clan, or they'd have taken it down. If they happen to be at peace with the clan the dead man belonged to, they'll make tracks to his village to tell his tribe.'

'Perhaps they killed him,' suggested Valenso.

'No, they didn't. But they know who did, for the same reason that I know. This chain was knotted about the stump of the severed neck. You must have been utterly mad, to identify your handiwork like that.'

He drew forth something and tossed it on the table before the Count, who lurched up, choking, as his hand flew to his throat. It was the gold seal-chain he habitually wore about his neck.

'I recognized the Korzetta seal,' said Conan. 'The presence of that chain would tell any Pict it was the work of a foreigner.'

Valenso did not reply. He sat staring at the chain as if at a venomous serpent.

Conan scowled at him, and glanced questioningly at the others. Zaronno made a quick gesture to indicate the Count was not quite right in the head.

Conan sheathed his cutlass and donned his lacquered hat.

‘All right; let’s go.’

The captains gulped down their wine and rose, hitching at their sword-hilts. Zaronno laid a hand on Valenso’s arm and shook him slightly. The Count started and stared about him, then followed the others out, like a man in a daze, the chain dangling from his fingers. But not all left the hall.

Belesa and Tina, forgotten on the stair, peeping between the balusters, saw Galbro fall behind the others, loitering until the heavy door closed after them. Then he hurried to the fireplace and raked carefully at the smoldering coals. He sank to his knees and peered closely at something for a long space. Then he straightened, and with a furtive air stole out of the hall by another door.

‘What did Galbro find in the fire?’ whispered Tina. Belesa shook her head, then, obeying the promptings of her curiosity, rose and went down to the empty hall. An instant later she was kneeling where the seneschal had knelt, and she saw what he had seen.

It was the charred remnant of the map Conan had thrown into the fire. It was ready to crumble at a touch, but faint lines and bits of writing were still discernible upon it. She could not read the writing, but she could trace the outlines of what seemed to be the picture of a hill or crag, surrounded by marks evidently representing dense trees. She could make nothing of it, but from Galbro’s actions, she believed he recognized it as portraying some scene or topographical feature familiar to him. She knew the seneschal had penetrated inland further than any other man of the settlement.

6 The Plunder of the Dead

Belesa came down the stair and paused at the sight of Count Valenso seated at the table, turning the broken chain about in his hands. She looked at him without love, and with more than a little fear. The change that had come over him was appalling; he seemed to be locked up in a grim world all of his own, with a fear that flogged all human characteristics out of him.

The fortress stood strangely quiet in the noonday heat that had followed the storm of the dawn. Voices of people within the stockade sounded subdued, muffled. The same drowsy stillness reigned on the beach outside where the rival crews lay in armed suspicion, separated by a few hundred yards of bare sand. Far out in the bay the Red Hand lay at anchor with a handful of men aboard her, ready to snatch her out of reach at the slightest

indication of treachery. The carack was Strom's trump card, his best guarantee against the trickery of his associates.

Conan had plotted shrewdly to eliminate the chances of an ambush in the forest by either party. But as far as Belesa could see, he had failed utterly to safeguard himself against the treachery of his companions. He had disappeared into the woods, leading the two captains and their thirty men, and the Zingaran girl was positive that she would never see him alive again.

Presently she spoke, and her voice was strained and harsh to her own ear.

'The barbarian has led the captains into the forest. When they have the gold in their hands, they'll kill him. But when they return with the treasure, what then? Are we to go aboard the ship? Can we trust Strom?'

Valenso shook his head absently.

'Strom would murder us all for our shares of the loot. But Zaronno whispered his intentions to me secretly. We will not go aboard the Red Hand save as her masters. Zaronno will see that night overtakes the treasure-party, so they are forced to camp in the forest. He will find a way to kill Strom and his men in their sleep. Then the buccaneers will come on stealthily to the beach. Just before dawn I will send some of my fishermen secretly from the fort to swim out to the ship and seize her. Strom never thought of that, neither did Conan. Zaronno and his men will come out of the forest and with the buccaneers encamped on the beach, fall upon the pirates in the dark, while I lead my men-at-arms from the fort to complete the rout. Without their captain they will be demoralized, and outnumbered, fall easy prey to Zaronno and me. Then we will sail in Strom's ship with all the treasure.'

'And what of me?' she asked with dry lips.

'I have promised you to Zaronno,' he answered harshly. 'But for my promise he would not take us off.'

'I will never marry him,' she said helplessly.

'You will,' he responded gloomily, and without the slightest touch of sympathy. He lifted the chain so it caught the gleam of the sun, slanting through a window. 'I must have dropped it on the sand,' he muttered. 'He has been that near — on the beach—'

'You did not drop it on the strand,' said Belesa, in a voice as devoid of mercy as his own; her soul seemed turned to stone. 'You tore it from your throat, by accident, last night in this hall, when you flogged Tina. I saw it gleaming on the floor before I left the hall.'

He looked up, his face grey with a terrible fear.

She laughed bitterly, sensing the mute question in his dilated eyes.

'Yes! the black man! He was here! In this hall! He must have found the chain on the floor. The guardsmen did not see him. But he was at your door last night. I saw him, padding along the upper hallway.'

For an instant she thought he would drop dead of sheer terror. He sank back in his chair, the chain slipping from his nerveless fingers and clinking on the table.

'In the manor!' he whispered. 'I thought bolts and bars and armed guards could keep him out, fool that I was! I can no more guard against him than I can escape him! At my door! At my door!' The thought overwhelmed him with horror. 'Why did he not enter?' he shrieked, tearing at the lace upon his collar as though it strangled him. 'Why did he not end it? I have dreamed of waking in my darkened chamber to see him squatting above me and the blue hell-fire playing about his hornedhead! Why—'

The paroxysm passed, leaving him faint and trembling.

'I understand!' he panted. 'He is playing with me, as a cat with a mouse. To have slain me last night in my chamber were too easy, too merciful. So he destroyed the ship in which I might have escaped him, and he slew that wretched Pict and left my chain upon him, so that the savages might believe I had slain him - they have seen that chain upon my neck many a time.

'But why? What subtle deviltry has he in mind, what devious purpose no human mind can grasp or understand?'

'Who is this black man?' asked Belesa, chill fear crawling along her spine.

'A demon loosed by my greed and lust to plague me throughout eternity!' he whispered. He spread his long thin fingers on the table before him, and stared at her with hollow, weirdly luminous eyes that seemed to see her not at all, but to look through her and far beyond to some dim doom.

'In my youth I had an enemy at court,' he said, as if speaking more to himself than to her. 'A powerful man who stood between me and my ambition. In my lust for wealth and power I sought aid from the people of the black arts - a black magician, who, at my desire, raised up a fiend from the outer gulfs of existence and clothed it in the form of a man. It crushed and slew my enemy; I grew great and wealthy and none could stand before me. But I thought to cheat my fiend of the price a mortal must pay who calls the black folk to do his bidding.

'By his grim arts the magician tricked the soulless waif of darkness and bound him in hell where he howled in vain - I supposed for eternity. But because the sorcerer had given the fiend the form of a man, he could never break the link that bound it to the material world; never completely close the cosmic corridors by which it had gained access to this planet.

'A year ago in Kordava word came to me that the magician, now an ancient man, had been slain in his castle, with marks of demon fingers on his throat. Then I knew that the black one had escaped from the hell where the magician had bound him, and that he would seek vengeance upon me. One night I saw his demon face leering at me from the shadows in my castle hall—

'It was not his material body, but his spirit sent to plague me - his spirit which could not follow me over the windy waters. Before he could reach Kordava in the flesh, I sailed to

put broad seas between me and him. He has his limitations. To follow me across the seas he must remain in his man-like body of flesh. But that flesh is not human flesh. He can be slain, I think, by fire, though the magician, having raised him up, was powerless to slay him - such are the limits set upon the powers of sorcerers.

'But the black one is too crafty to be trapped or slain. When he hides himself no man can find him. He steals like a shadow through the night, making naught of bolts and bars. He blinds the eyes of guardsmen with sleep. He can raise storms and command the serpents of the deep, and the fiends of the night. I hoped to drown my trail in the blue rolling wastes - but he has tracked me down to claim his grim forfeit.'

The weird eyes lit palely as he gazed beyond the tapestried walls to far, invisible horizons.

'I'll trick him yet,' he whispered. 'Let him delay to strike this night - dawn will find me with a ship under my heels and again I will cast an ocean between me and his vengeance.'

'Hell's fire!'

Conan stopped short, glaring upward. Behind him the seamen halted - two compact clumps of them, bows in their hands, and suspicion in their attitude. They were following an old path made by Pictish hunters which led due east, and though they had progressed only some thirty yards, the beach was no longer visible.

'What is it?' demanded Strom suspiciously. 'What are you stopping for?'

'Are you blind? Look there!'

From the thick limb of a tree that overhung the trail a head grinned down at them - a dark painted face, framed in thick black hair, in which a toucan feather drooped over the left ear.

'I took that head down and hid it in the bushes,' growled Conan, scanning the woods about them narrowly. 'What fool could have stuck it back up there? It looks as if somebody was trying his damndest to bring the Picts down on the settlement.'

Men glanced at each other darkly, a new element of suspicion added to the already seething caldron.

Conan climbed the tree, secured the head and carried it into the bushes, where he tossed it into a stream and saw it sink.

'The Picts whose tracks are about this tree weren't Toucans,' he growled, returning through the thicket. 'I've sailed these coasts enough to know something about the sea-land tribes. If I read the prints of their moccasins right, they were Cormorants. I hope they're having a war with the Toucans. If they're at peace, they'll head straight for the Toucan village, and there'll be hell to pay. I don't know how far away that village is - but as soon as they learn of this murder, they'll come through the forest like starving wolves. That's the worst insult possible to a Pict - kill a man not in war-paint and stick his head up in a tree for the vultures to eat. Damn peculiar things going on along this coast. But that's

always the way when civilized men come into the wilderness. They're all crazy as hell. Come on.'

Men loosened blades in their scabbards and shafts in their quivers as they strode deeper into the forest. Men of the sea, accustomed to the rolling expanses of grey water, they were ill at ease with the green mysterious walls of trees and vines hemming them in. The path wound and twisted until most of them quickly lost their sense of direction, and did not even know in which direction the beach lay.

Conan was uneasy for another reason. He kept scanning the trail, and finally grunted: 'Somebody's passed along here recently - not more than an hour ahead of us. Somebody in boots, with no woods-craft. Was he the fool who found that Pict's head and stuck it back up in that tree? No, it couldn't have been him. I didn't find his tracks under the tree. But who was it? I didn't find any tracks there, except those of the Picts I'd seen already. And who's this fellow hurrying ahead of us? Did either of you bastards send a man ahead of us for any reason?'

Both Strom and Zarono loudly disclaimed any such act, glaring at each other with mutual disbelief. Neither man could see the signs Conan pointed out; the faint prints which he saw on the grassless, hard-beaten trail were invisible to their untrained eyes.

Conan quickened his pace and they hurried after him, fresh coals of suspicion added to the smoldering fire of distrust. Presently the path veered northward, and Conan left it, and began threading his way through the dense trees in a southeasterly direction. Strom stole an uneasy glance at Zarono. This might force a change in their plans. Within a few hundred feet from the trail both were hopelessly lost, and convinced of their inability to find their way back to the path. They were shaken by the fear that, after all, the Cimmerian had a force at his command, and was leading them into an ambush.

This suspicion grew as they advanced, and had almost reached panic proportions when they emerged from the thick woods and saw just ahead of them a gaunt crag that jutted up from the forest floor. A dim path leading out of the woods from the east ran among a cluster of boulders and wound up the crag on a ladder of stony shelves to a flat ledge near the summit. Conan halted, a bizarre figure in his piratical finery. 'That trail is the one I followed, running from the Eagle-Picts,' he said. 'It leads up to a cave behind that ledge. In that cave are the bodies of Tranicos and his captains, and the treasure he plundered from Tothmekri. But a word before we go up after it: if you kill me here, you'll never find your way back to the trail we followed from the beach. I know you seafaring men. You're helpless in the deep woods. Of course the beach lies due west, but if you have to make your way through the tangled woods, burdened with the plunder, it'll take you not hours, but days. And I don't think these woods will be very safe for white men, when the Toucans learn about their hunter.' He laughed at the ghastly, mirthless smiles with which they greeted his recognition of their intentions regarding him. And he also comprehended the thought that sprang in the mind of each: let the barbarian secure the loot for them, and lead them back to the beach-trail before they killed him.

'All of you stay here except Strom and Zarono,' said Conan. 'We three are enough to pack the treasure down from the cave.' Strom grinned mirthlessly.

'Go up there alone with you and Zarono? Do you take me for a fool? One man at least comes with me!' And he designated his boatswain, a brawny, hard-faced giant, naked to his broad leather belt, with gold hoops in his ears, and a crimson scarf knotted about his head.

'And my executioner comes with me!' growled Zarono. He beckoned to a lean sea-thief with a face like a parchment-covered skull, who carried a two-handed scimitar naked over his bony shoulder.

Conan shrugged his shoulders. 'Very well. Follow me.'

They were close on his heels as he strode up the winding path and mounted the ledge. They crowded him close as he passed through the cleft in the wall behind it, and their breath sucked greedily between their teeth as he called their attention to the iron-bound chests on either side of the short tunnel-like cavern.

'A rich cargo there,' he said carelessly. 'Silks, laces, garments, ornaments, weapons - the loot of the southern seas. But the real treasure lies beyond that door.'

The massive door stood partly open. Conan frowned. He remembered closing that door before he left the cavern. But he said nothing of the matter to his eager companions as he drew aside to let them look through.

They looked into a wide cavern, lit by a strange blue glow that glimmered through a smoky mist-like haze. A great ebon table stood in the midst of the cavern, and in a carved chair with a high back and broad arms, that might once have stood in the castle of some Zingaran baron, sat a giant figure, fabulous and fantastic - there sat Bloody Trnicos, his great head sunk on his bosom, one brawny hand still gripping a jeweled goblet in which wine still sparkled; Trnicos, in his lacquered hat, his gilt-embroidered coat with jeweled buttons that winked in the blue flame, his flaring boots and gold-worked baldric that upheld a jewel-hiked sword in a golden sheath.

And ranging the board, each with his chin resting on his lace-bedecked crest, sat the eleven captains. The blue fire played weirdly on them and on their giant admiral, as it flowed from the enormous jewel on the tiny ivory pedestal, striking glints of frozen fire from the heaps of fantastically cut gems which shone before the place of Trnicos - the plunder of Khemi, the jewels of Tothmekri! The stones whose value was greater than the value of all the rest of the known jewels in the world put together!

The faces of Zarono and Strom showed pallid in the blue glow; over their shoulders their men gaped stupidly.

'Go in and take them,' invited Conan, drawing aside, and Zarono and Strom crowded avidly past him, jostling one another in their haste. Their followers were treading on their heels. Zarono kicked the door wide open - and halted with one foot on the threshold at the sight of a figure on the floor, previously hidden from view by the partly-closed door. It

was a man, prone and contorted, head drawn back between his shoulders, white face twisted in a grin of mortal agony, gripping his own throat with clawed fingers.

'Galbro!' ejaculated Zaron. 'Dead! What—' With sudden suspicion he thrust his head over the threshold, into the bluish mist that filled the inner cavern. And he screamed, chokingly: 'There is death in the smoke!'

Even as he screamed, Conan hurled his weight against the four men bunched in the doorway, sending them staggering -but not headlong into the mist-filled cavern as he had planned. They were recoiling at the sight of the dead man and the realization of the trap, and his violent push, while it threw them off their feet, yet failed of the result he desired. Strom and Zaron sprawled half over the threshold on their knees, the boatswain tumbling over their legs, and the executioner caromed against the wall. Before Conan could follow up his ruthless intention of kicking the fallen men into the cavern and holding the door against them until the poisonous mist did its deadly work, he had to turn and defend himself against the frothing onslaught of the executioner who was the first to regain his balance and his wits.

The buccaneer missed a tremendous swipe with his headsman's sword as the Cimmerian ducked, and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant his skull-faced head rolled on the cavern-floor under the bite of Conan's cutlass.

In the split seconds this swift action consumed, the boatswain regained his feet and fell on the Cimmerian raining blows with a cutlass that would have overwhelmed a lesser man. Cutlass met cutlass with a ring of steel that was deafening in the narrow cavern. The two captains rolled back across the threshold, gagging and gasping, purple in the face and too near strangled to shout, and Conan redoubled his efforts, in an endeavor to dispose of his antagonist and cut down his rivals before they could recover from the effects of the poison. The boatswain dripped blood at each step, as he was driven back before the ferocious onslaught, and he began desperately to bellow for his companions. But before Conan could deal the finishing stroke the two chiefs, gasping but murderous, came at him with swords in their hands, croaking for their men.

The Cimmerian bounded back and leaped out onto the ledge. He felt himself a match for all three men, though each was a famed swordsman, but he did not wish to be trapped by the crews which would come charging up the path at the sound of the battle.

These were not coming with as much celerity as he expected, however. They were bewildered at the sounds and muffled shouts issuing from the cavern above them but no man dared start up the path for fear of a sword in the back. Each band faced the other tensely, grasping their weapons but incapable of decision, and when they saw the Cimmerian bound out on the ledge, they still hesitated. While they stood with their arrows nocked he ran up the ladder of handholds niched in the rock near the cleft, and threw himself prone on the summit of the crag, out of their sight.

The captains stormed out on the ledge, raving and brandishing their swords, and their men, seeing their leaders were not at sword-strokes, ceased menacing each other, and gaped bewilderedly.

'Dog!' screamed Zarono. 'You planned to poison us! Traitor!'

Conan mocked them from above.

'Well, what did you expect? You two were planning to cut my throat as soon as I got the plunder for you. If it hadn't been for that fool Galbro I'd have trapped the four of you, and explained to your men how you rushed in heedless to your doom.'

'And with us both dead, you'd have taken my ship, and all the loot too!' frothed Strom.

'Aye! And the pick of each crew! I've been wanting to get back on the Main for months, and this was a good opportunity!

'It was Galbro's foot-prints I saw on the trail. I wonder how the fool learned of this cave, or how he expected to lug away the loot by himself.'

'But for the sight of his body we'd have walked into that death-trap,' muttered Zarono, his swarthy face still ashy. 'That blue smoke was like unseen fingers crushing my throat.'

'Well, what are you going to do?' their unseen tormentor yelled sardonically.

'What are we to do?' Zarono asked Strom. 'The treasure-cavern is filled with that poisonous mist, though for some reason it does not flow across the threshold.'

'You can't get the treasure,' Conan assured them with satisfaction from his aerie. 'That smoke will strangle you. It nearly got me, when I stepped in there. Listen, and I'll tell you a tale the Picts tell in their huts when the fires burn low! Once, long ago, twelve strange men came out of the sea, and found a cave and heaped it with gold and and jewels; but a Pictish shaman made magic and the earth shook, and smoke came out of the earth and strangled them where they sat at wine. The smoke, which was the smoke of hell's fire, was confined within the cavern by the magic of the wizard. The tale was told from tribe to tribe, and all the clans shun the accursed spot.'

'When I crawled in there to escape the Eagle-Picts, I realized that the old legend was true, and referred to old Tranicos and his men. An earthquake cracked the rock floor of the cavern while he and his captains sat at wine, and let the mist out of the depths of the earth - doubtless out of hell, as the Picts say. Death guards old Tranicos' treasure!'

'Bring up the men!' frothed Strom. 'We'll climb up and hew him down!'

'Don't be a fool,' snarled Zarono. 'Do you think any man on earth could climb those hand-holds in the teeth of his sword? We'll have the men up here, right enough, to feather him with shafts if he dares show himself. But we'll get those gems yet. He had some plan of obtaining the loot, or he wouldn't have brought thirty men to bear it back. If he could get it, so can we. We'll bend a cutlass-blade to make a hook, tie it to a rope and cast it about the leg of that table, then drag it to the door.'

'Well thought, Zarono!' came down Conan's mocking voice. 'Exactly what I had in mind. But how will you find your way back to the beach-path? It'll be dark long before you reach the beach, if you have to feel your way through the woods, and I'll follow you and kill you one by one in the dark.'

'It's no empty boast,' muttered Strom. 'He can move and strike in the dark as subtly and silently as a ghost. If he hunts us back through the forest, few of us will live to see the beach.'

'Then we'll kill him here,' gritted Zarono. 'Some of us will shoot at him while the rest climb the crag. If he is not struck by arrows, some of us will reach him with our swords. Listen! Why does he laugh?'

'To hear dead men making plots,' came Conan's grimly amused voice.

'Heed him not,' scowled Zarono, and lifting his voice, shouted for the men below to join him and Strom on the ledge.

The sailors started up the slanting trail, and one started to shout a question. Simultaneously there sounded a hum like that of an angry bee, ending in a sharp thud. The buccaneer gasped and blood gushed from his open mouth. He sank to his knees, clutching the black shaft that quivered in his breast. A yell of alarm went up from his companions.

'What's the matter?' shouted Strom.

'Picts!' bawled a pirate, lifting his bow and loosing blindly. At his side a man moaned and went down with an arrow through his throat.

'Take cover, you fools!' shrieked Zarono. From his vantage-point he glimpsed painted figures moving in the bushes. One of the men on the winding path fell back dying. The rest scrambled hastily down among the rocks about the foot of the crag. They took cover clumsily, not used to this kind of fighting. Arrows flickered from bushes, splintering on the boulders. The men on the ledge lay prone at full length.

'We're trapped!' Strom's face was pale. Bold enough with a deck under his feet, this silent, savage warfare shook his ruthless nerves.

'Conan said they feared this crag,' said Zarono. 'When night falls the men must climb up here. We'll hold the crag. The Picts won't rush us.'

'Aye!' mocked Conan above them. 'They won't climb the crag to get at you, that's true. They'll merely surround it and keep you here until you all die of thirst and starvation.'

'He speaks truth,' said Zarono helplessly. 'What shall we do?'

'Make a truce with him,' muttered Strom. 'If any man can get us out of this jam, he can. Time enough to cut his throat later.' Lifting his voice he called: 'Conan, let's forget our feud for the time being. You're in this fix as much as we are. Come down and help us out of it.'

'How do you figure that?' retorted the Cimmerian. 'I have but to wait until dark, climb down the other side of this crag and melt into the forest. I can crawl through the line the Picts have thrown around this hill, and return to the fort to report you all slain by the savages - which will shortly be truth!' Zarono and Strom stared at each other in pallid silence. 'But I'm not going to do that!' Conan roared. 'Not because I have any love for you dogs, but because a white man doesn't leave white men, even his enemies, to be butchered by Picts.'

The Cimmerian's tousled black head appeared over the crest of the crag.

'Now listen closely: that's only a small band down there. I saw them sneaking through the brush when I laughed, a while ago. Anyway, if there had been many of them, every man at the foot of the crag would be dead already. I think that's a band of fleet-footed young men sent ahead of the main war-party to cut us off from the beach. I'm certain a big war-band is heading in our direction from somewhere.

'They've thrown a cordon around the west side of the crag, but I don't think there are any on the east side. I'm going down on that side and get in the forest and work around behind them. Meanwhile, you crawl down the path and join your men among the rocks. Tell them to sling their bows and draw their swords. When you hear me yell, rush the trees on the west side of the clearing.'

'What of the treasure?'

'To hell with the treasure! We'll be lucky if we get out of here with our heads on our shoulders.'

The black-maned head vanished. They listened for sounds to indicate that Conan had crawled to the almost sheer eastern wall and was working his way down, but they heard nothing. Nor was there any sound in the forest. No more arrows broke against the rocks where the sailors were hidden. But all knew that fierce black eyes were watching with murderous patience.

Gingerly Strom, Zarono and the boatswain started down the winding path. They were halfway down when the black shafts began to whisper around them. The boatswain groaned and toppled limply down the slope, shot through the heart. Arrows shivered on the helmets and breastplates of the chiefs as they tumbled in frantic haste down the steep trail. They reached the foot in a scrambling rush and lay panting among the boulders, swearing breathlessly.

'Is this more of Conan's trickery?' wondered Zarono profanely.

'We can trust him in this matter,' asserted Strom. 'These barbarians live by their own particular code of honor, and Conan would never desert men of his own complexion to be slaughtered by people of another race. He'll help us against the Picts, even though he plans to murder us himself - hark?'

A blood-freezing yell knifed the silence. It came from the woods to the west, and simultaneously an object arched out of the trees, struck the ground and rolled bouncingly

towards the rocks - a severed human head, the hideously painted face frozen in a snarl of death.

'Conan's signal!' roared Strom, and the desperate freebooters rose like a wave from the rocks and rushed headlong toward the woods.

Arrows whirred out of the bushes, but their flight was hurried and erratic, only three men fell. Then the wild men of the sea plunged through the fringe of foliage and fell on the naked painted figures that rose out of the gloom before them. There was a murderous instant of panting, ferocious effort, hand-to-hand, cutlasses beating down war-axes, booted feet trampling naked bodies, and then bare feet were rattling through the bushes in headlong flight as the survivors of that brief carnage quit the fray, leaving seven still, painted figures stretched on the blood-stained leaves that littered the earth. Further back in the thickets sounded a thrashing and heaving, and then it ceased and Conan strode into view, his lacquered hat gone, his coat torn, his cutlass dripping in his hand.

'What now?' panted Zarono. He knew the charge had succeeded only because Conan's unexpected attack on the rear of the Picts had demoralized the painted men, and prevented them from falling back before the rush. But he exploded into curses as Conan passed his cutlass through a buccaneer who writhed on the ground with a shattered hip.

'We can't carry him with us,' grunted Conan. 'It wouldn't be any kindness to leave him to be taken alive by the Picts. Come on!'

They crowded close at his heels as he trotted through the trees. Alone they would have sweated and blundered among the thickets for hours before they found the beach-trail - if they had ever found it. The Cimmerian led them as unerringly as if he had been following a blazed path, and the rovers shouted with hysterical relief as they burst suddenly upon the trail that ran westward.

'Fool!' Conan clapped a hand on the shoulder of a pirate who started to break into a run, and hurled him back among his companions. 'You'll burst your heart and fall within a thousand yards. We're miles from the beach. Take an easy gait. We may have to sprint the last mile. Save some of your wind for it. Come on, now.'

He set off down the trail at a steady jog-trot; the seamen followed him, suiting their pace to his.

The sun was touching the waves of the western ocean. Tina stood at the window from which Belesa had watched the storm.

'The setting sun turns the ocean to blood,' she said. 'The carack's sail is a white fleck on the crimson waters. The woods are already darkened with clustering shadows.'

'What of the seamen on the beach?' asked Belesa languidly. She reclined on a couch, her eyes closed, her hands clasped behind her head.

'Both camps are preparing their supper,' said Tina. 'They gather driftwood and build fires. I can hear them shouting to one another - what is that?'

The sudden tenseness in the girl's tone brought Belesa upright on the couch. Tina grasped the window-sill, her face white.

'Listen! A howling, far off, like many wolves!'

'Wolves?' Belesa sprang up, fear clutching her heart. 'Wolves do not hunt in packs at this time of the year—'

'Oh, look!' shrilled the girl, pointing. 'Men are running out Of the forest!'

In an instant Belesa was beside her, staring wide-eyed at the figures, small in the distance, streaming out of the woods.

'The sailors!' she gasped. 'Empty-handed! I see Zarono — Strom—'

'Where is Conan?' whispered the girl.

Belesa shook her head.

'Listen! Oh, listen!' whimpered the child, clinging to her. 'The Picts!'

All in the fort could hear it now - a vast ululation of mad exultation and blood-lust, from the depths of the dark forest.

That sound spurred on the panting men reeling toward the palisade.

'Hasten!' gasped Strom, his face a drawn mask of exhausted effort. 'They are almost at our heels. My ship—'

'She is too far out for us to reach,' panted Zarono. 'Make for the stockade. See, the men camped on the beach have seen us!' He waved his arms in breathless pantomime, but the men on the strand understood, and they recognized the significance of that wild howling, rising to a triumphant crescendo. The sailors abandoned their fires and cooking-pots and fled for the stockade gate. They were pouring through it as the fugitives from the forest rounded the south angle and reeled into the gate, a heaving, frantic mob, half-dead from exhaustion. The gate was slammed with frenzied haste, and sailors began to climb the firing-ledge, to join the men-at-arms already there.

Belesa confronted Zarono.

'Where is Conan?'

The buccaneer jerked a thumb toward the blackening woods; his chest heaved; sweat poured down his face. 'Their scouts were at our heels before we gained the beach. He paused to slay a few and give us time to get away.'

He staggered away to take his place on the firing-ledge, whither Strom had already mounted. Valenso stood there, a somber, cloak-wrapped figure, strangely silent and aloof. He was like a man bewitched.

'Look!' yelped a pirate, above the deafening howling of the yet unseen horde.

A man emerged from the forest and raced fleetly across the open belt.

'Conan!'

Zarono grinned wolfishly.

'We're safe in the stockade; we know where the treasure is. No reason why we shouldn't feather him with arrows now.'

'Nay!' Strom caught his arm. 'We'll need his sword! Look!'

Behind the fleet-footed Cimmerian a wild horde burst from the forest, howling as they ran - naked Picts, hundreds and hundreds of them. Their arrows rained about the Cimmerian. A few strides more and Conan reached the eastern wall of the stockade, bounded high, seized the points of the logs and heaved himself up and over, his cutlass in his teeth. Arrows thudded venomously into the logs where his body had just been. His resplendent coat was gone, his white silk shirt torn and bloodstained.

'Stop them!' he roared as his feet hit the ground inside. 'If they get on the wall, we're done for!'

Pirates, buccaneers and men-at-arms responded instantly, and a storm of arrows and quarrels tore into the oncoming horde.

Conan saw Belesa, with Tina clinging to her hand, and his language was picturesque.

'Get into the manor,' he commanded in conclusion. 'Their shafts will arch over the wall - what did I tell you?' As a black shaft cut into the earth at Belesa's feet and quivered like a serpent-head, Conan caught up a longbow and leaped to the firing-ledge. 'Some of you fellows prepare torches!' he roared, above the rising clamor of the battle. 'We can't fight them in the dark!'

The sun had sunk in a welter of blood; out in the bay the men aboard the carack had cut the anchor chain and the Red Hand was rapidly receding on the crimson horizon.

7 Men of the Woods

Night had fallen, but torches streamed across the strand, casting the mad scene into lurid revelation. Naked men in paint swarmed the beach; like waves they came against the palisade, bared teeth and blazing eyes gleaming in the glare of the torches thrust over the wall. Toucan feathers waved in black manes, and the feathers of the cormorant and the sea-falcon. A few warriors, the wildest and most barbaric of them all, wore shark's teeth woven in their tangled locks. The sea-land tribes had gathered from up and down the coast in all directions to rid their country of the white-skinned invaders.

They surged against the palisade, driving a storm of arrows before them, fighting into the teeth of the shafts and bolts that tore into their masses from the stockade. Sometimes they came so close to the wall they were hewing at the gate with their war-axes and thrusting their spears through the loop-holes. But each time the tide ebbed back without flowing over the palisade, leaving its drift of dead. At this kind of fighting the freebooters of the

sea were at their stoutest; their arrows and bolts tore holes in the charging horde, their cutlasses hewed the wild men from the palisades they strove to scale.

Yet again and again the men of the woods returned to the onslaught with all the stubborn ferocity that had been roused in their fierce hearts.

'They are like mad dogs!' gasped Zaron, hacking downward at the dark hands that grasped at the palisade points, the dark faces that snarled up at him.

'If we can hold the fort until dawn they'll lose heart,' grunted Conan, splitting a feathered skull with professional precision. 'They won't maintain a long siege. Look, they're falling back.'

The charge rolled back and the men on the wall shook the sweat out of their eyes, counted their dead and took a fresh grasp on the blood-slippery hilts of their swords. Like blood-hungry wolves, grudgingly driven from a cornered prey, the Picts skulked back beyond the ring of torches. Only the bodies of the slain lay before the palisade.

'Have they gone?' Strom shook back his wet, tawny locks. The cutlass in his fist was notched and red, his brawny bare arm was splashed with blood.

'They're still out there,' Conan nodded toward the outer darkness which ringed the circle of torches, made more intense by their light. He glimpsed movements in the shadows; glitter of eyes and the dull sheen of steel.

'They've drawn off for a bit, though,' he said. 'Put sentries on the wall, and let the rest drink and eat. It's past midnight. We've been fighting for hours without much interval.'

The chiefs clambered down from the ledges, calling their men from the walls. A sentry was posted in the middle of each wall, east, west, north and south, and a clump of men-at-arms were left at the gate. The Picts, to reach the wall, would have to charge across a wide, torchlit space, and the defenders could resume their places long before the attackers could reach the palisade.

'Where's Valenso?' demanded Conan, gnawing a huge beef-bone as he stood beside the fire the men had built in the center of the compound. Pirates, buccaneers and henchmen mingled with each other, wolfing the meat and ale the women brought them, and allowing their wounds to be bandaged.

'He disappeared an hour ago,' grunted Strom. 'He was fighting on the wall beside me, when suddenly he stopped short and glared out into the darkness as if he saw a ghost. "Look!" he croaked. "The black devil! I see him! Out there in the night!" Well, I could swear I saw a figure moving among the shadows that was too tall for a Pict. But it was just a glimpse and it was gone. But Valenso jumped down from the firing-ledge and staggered into the manor like a man with a mortal wound. I haven't seen him since.'

'He probably saw a forest-devil,' said Conan tranquilly. 'The Picts say this coast is lousy with them. What I'm more afraid of is fire-arrows. The Picts are likely to start shooting them at any time. What's that? It sounded like a cry for help?'

When the lull came in the fighting, Belesa and Tina had crept to their window, from which they had been driven by the danger of flying arrows. Silently they watched the men gather about the fire.

'There are not enough men on the stockade,' said Tina.

In spite of her nausea at the sight of the corpses sprawled about the palisade, Belesa was forced to laugh.

'Do you think you know more about wars and sieges than the freebooters?' she chided gently.

'There should be more men on the walls,' insisted the child, shivering. 'Suppose the black man came back?'

Belesa shuddered at the thought.

'I am afraid,' murmured Tina. 'I hope Strom and Zaron are killed.'

'And not Conan?' asked Belesa curiously.

'Conan would not harm us,' said the child, confidently. 'He lives up to his barbaric code of honor, but they are men who have lost all honor.'

'You are wise beyond your years, Tina,' said Belesa, with the vague uneasiness the precocity of the girl frequently roused in her.

'Look!' Tina stiffened. 'The sentry is gone from the south wall! I saw him on the ledge a moment ago; now he has vanished.'

From their window the palisade points of the south wall were just visible over the slanting roofs of a row of huts which paralleled that wall almost its entire length. A sort of open-topped corridor, three or four yards wide, was framed by the stockade and the back of the huts, which were built in a solid row. These huts were occupied by the serfs.

'Where could the sentry have gone?' whispered Tina uneasily.

Belesa was watching one end of the hut-row which was not far from a side door of the manor. She could have sworn she saw a shadowy figure glide from behind the huts and disappear at the door. Was that the vanished sentry? Why had he left the wall, and why should he steal so subtly into the manor? She did not believe it was the sentry she had seen, and a nameless fear congealed her blood.

'Where is the Count, Tina?' she asked.

'In the great hall, my Lady. He sits alone at the table, wrapped in his cloak and drinking wine, with a face gray as death.'

'Go and tell him what we have seen. I will keep watch from this window, lest the Picts steal to the unguarded wall.'

Tina scampered away. Belesa heard her slippered feet pattering along the corridor, receding down the stair. Then abruptly, terribly, there rang out a scream of such poignant fear that Belesa's heart almost stopped with the shock of it. She was out of the chamber and flying down the corridor before she was aware that her limbs were in motion. She ran down the stair -and halted as if turned to stone.

She did not scream as Tina had screamed. She was incapable of sound or motion. She saw Tina, was aware of the reality of small hands grasping her frantically. But these were the only sane realities in a scene of black nightmare and lunacy and death, dominated by the monstrous, anthropomorphic shadow which spread awful arms against a lurid, hell-fire glare.

Out in the stockade Strom shook his head at Conan's question.

'I heard nothing.'

'I did!' Conan's wild instincts were roused; he was tensed, his eyes blazing. 'It came from the south wall, behind those huts!'

Drawing his cutlass he strode toward the palisade. From the compound the wall on the south and the sentry posted there were not visible, being hidden behind the huts. Strom followed, impressed by the Cimmerian's manner.

At the mouth of the open space between the huts and wall Conan halted, warily. The space was dimly lighted by torches flaring at either corner of the stockade. And about mid-way of that natural corridor a crumpled shape sprawled on the ground.

'Bracus!' swore Strom, running forward and dropping on one knee beside the figure. 'By Mitra, his throat's been cut from ear to ear!'

Conan swept the space with a quick glance, finding it empty save for himself, Strom and the dead man. He peered through a loop-hole. No living man moved within the ring of torch-light outside the fort.

'Who could have done this?' he wondered.

'Zarono!' Strom sprang up, spitting fury like a wildcat, his hair bristling, his face convulsed. 'He has set his thieves to stabbing my men in the back! He plans to wipe me out by treachery! Devils! I am leagued within and without!'

'Wait!' Conan reached a restraining hand. 'I don't believe Zarono—'

But the maddened pirate jerked away and rushed around the end of the hut-row, breathing blasphemies. Conan ran after him, swearing. Strom made straight toward the fire by which Zarono's tall lean form was visible as the buccaneer chief quaffed a jack of ale.

His amazement was supreme when the jack was dashed violently from his hand, spattering his breastplate with foam, and he was jerked around to confront the passion-distorted face of the pirate captain.

'You murdering dog!' roared Strom. 'Will you slay my men behind my back while they fight for your filthy hide as well as for mine?'

Conan was hurrying toward them and on all sides men ceased eating and drinking to stare in amazement.

'What do you mean?' sputtered Zaronno.

'You've set your men to stabbing mine at their posts!' screamed the maddened Barachan.

'You lie!' Smoldering hate burst into sudden flame. With an incoherent howl Strom heaved up his cutlass and cut at the buccaneer's head. Zaronno caught the blow on his armored left arm and sparks flew as he staggered back, ripping out his own sword.

In an instant the captains were fighting like madmen, their blades flaming and flashing in the firelight. Their crews reacted instantly and blindly. A deep roar went up as pirates and buccaneers drew their swords and fell upon each other. The men left on the walls abandoned their posts and leaped down into the stockade, blades in hand. In an instant the compound was a battle-ground, where knotting, writhing groups of men smote and slew in a blind frenzy. Some of the men-at-arms and serfs were drawn into the melee, and the soldiers at the gate turned and stared down in amazement, forgetting the enemy which lurked outside.

It had all happened so quickly - smoldering passions exploding into sudden battle - that men were fighting all over the compound before Conan could reach the maddened chiefs. Ignoring their swords he tore them apart with such violence that they staggered backward, and Zaronno tripped and fell headlong.

'You cursed fools, will you throw away all our lives?'

Strom was frothing mad and Zaronno was bawling for assistance. A buccaneer ran at Conan from behind and cut at his head. The Cimmerian half turned and caught his arm, checking the stroke in mid-air.

'Look, you fools!' he roared, pointing with his sword. Something in his tone caught the attention of the battle-crazed mob; men froze in their places, with lifted swords, Zaronno on one knee, and twisted their heads to stare. Conan was pointing at a soldier on the firing-ledge. The man was reeling, arms clawing the air, choking as he tried to shout. Suddenly he pitched headlong to the ground and all saw the black arrow standing up between his shoulders.

A cry of alarm rose from the compound. On the heels of the shout came a clamor of blood-freezing screams, the shattering impact of axes on the gate. Flaming arrows arched over the wall and stuck in logs, and thin wisps of blue smoke curled upward. Then from behind the huts that ranged the south wall came swift and furtive figures racing across the compound.

'The Picts are in!' roared Conan.

Bedlam followed his shout. The freebooters ceased their feud, some turned to meet the savages, some to spring to the wall. Savages were pouring from behind the huts and they streamed over the compound; their axes flashed against the cutlasses of the sailors.

Zarono was struggling to his feet when a painted savage rushed upon him from behind and brained him with a war-ax.

Conan with a clump of sailors behind him was battling with the Picts inside the stockade, and Strom, with most of his men, was climbing up on the firing-ledges, slashing at the dark figures already swarming over the wall. The Picts, who had crept up unobserved and surrounded the fort while the defenders were fighting among themselves, were attacking from all sides. Val-enso's soldiers were clustered at the gate, trying to hold it against a howling swarm of exultant demons.

More and more savages streamed from behind the huts, having scaled the undefended south wall. Strom and his pirates were beaten back from the other sides of the palisade and in an instant the compound was swarming with naked warriors. They dragged down the defenders like wolves; the battle revolved into swirling whirlpools of painted figures surging about small groups of desperate white men. Picts, sailors and henchmen littered the earth, stamped underfoot by the heedless feet. Blood-smeared braves dived howling into huts and the shrieks that rose from the interiors where women and children died beneath the red axes rose above the din of the battle. The men-at-arms abandoned the gate when they heard those pitiful cries, and in an instant the Picts had burst it and were pouring into the palisade at that point also. Huts began to go up in flames.

'Make for the manor!' roared Conan, and a dozen men surged in behind him as he hewed an inexorable way through the snarling pack.

Strom was at his side, wielding his red cutlass like a flail.

'We can't hold the manor,' grunted the pirate.

'Why not?' Conan was too busy with his crimson work to spare a glance.

'Because—uh!' A knife in a dark hand sank deep in the Barachan's back. 'Devil eat you, bastard!' Strom turned staggeringly and split the savage's head to his teeth. The pirate reeled and fell to his knees, blood starting from his lips.

'The manor's burning!' he croaked, and slumped over in the dust.

Conan cast a swift look about him. The men who had followed him were all down in their blood. The Pict gasping out his life under the Cimmerian's feet was the last of the group which had barred his way. All about him battle was swirling and surging, but for the moment he stood alone. He was not far from the south wall. A few strides and he could leap to the the smoke, brandishing gleaming axes. They were still yards behind him when Conan ducked into the space between the huts and the wall. At die other end of the corridor he saw other howling shapes, running to cut him off. Halting short he tossed Belesa bodily to the fire-ledge and leaped after her. Swinging her over the palisade he

dropped her into the sand outside, and dropped Tina after her. A thrown ax crashed into a log by his shoulder, and then he too was over the wall and gathering up his dazed and helpless charges. When the Picts reached the wall the space before the palisade was empty of all except the dead.

8 A Pirate Returns to the Sea

Dawn was tingeing the dim waters with an old rose hue. Far out across the tinted waters a fleck of white grew out of the mist - a sail that seemed to hang suspended in the pearly sky. On a bushy headland Conan the Cimmerian held a ragged cloak over a fire of green wood. As he manipulated the cloak, puffs of smoke rose upward, quivered against the dawn and vanished.

Belesa crouched near him, one arm about Tina.

'Do you think they'll see it and understand?'

'They'll see it, right enough,' he assured her. 'They've been hanging off and on diis coast all night, hoping to sight some survivors. They're scared stiff. There's only half a dozen of them, and not one can navigate well enough to sail from here to the Barachan Isles. They'll understand my signals; it's the pirate code. I'm telling them that the captains are dead and all the sailors, and for them to come inshore and take us aboard. They know I can navigate, and they'll be glad to ship under me; they'll have to. I'm the only captain left.'

'But suppose the Picts see the smoke?' She shuddered, glancing back over the misty sands and bushes to where, miles to the north, a column of smoke stood up in the still air.

'They're not likely to see it. After I hid you in the woods I crept back and saw them dragging barrels of wine and ale out of the storehouses. Already most of them were reeling. They'll all be lying around too drunk to move by this time. If I had a hundred men I could wipe out the whole horde. Look! There goes a rocket from the Red Hand! That means they're coming to take us off!'

Conan stamped out the fire, handed the cloak back to Belesa and stretched like a great lazy cat. Belesa watched him in wonder. His unperturbed manner was not assumed; the night of fire and blood and slaughter, and the flight through the black woods afterward, had left his nerves untouched. He was as calm as if he had spent the night in feast and revel. Belesa did not fear him; she felt safer than she had felt since she landed on that wild coast. He was not like the freebooters, civilized men who had repudiated all standards of honor, and lived without any. Conan, on the other hand, lived according to the code of his people, which was barbaric and bloody, but at least upheld its own peculiar standards of honor.

'Do you think he is dead?' she asked, with seeming irrelevancy.

He did not ask her to whom she referred.

'I believe so. Silver and fire are both deadly to evil spirits, and he got a belly-full of both.'

Neither spoke of that subject again; Belesa's mind shrank from the task of conjuring up the scene when a black figure skulked into the great hall and a long-delayed vengeance was horribly consummated.

'What will you do when you get back to Zingara?' Conan asked.

She shook her head helplessly. 'I do not know. I have neither money nor friends. I am not trained to earn my living. Perhaps it would have been better had one of those arrows struck my heart.'

'Do not say that, my Lady!' begged Tina. 'I will work for us both!'

Conan drew a small leather bag from inside his girdle.

'I didn't get Tothmekri's jewels,' he rumbled. 'But here are some baubles I found in the chest where I got the clothes I'm wearing.' He spilled a handful of flaming rubies into his palm. 'They're worth a fortune, themselves.' He dumped them back into the bag and handed it to her.

'But I can't take these—' she began.

'Of course you'll take them. I might as well leave you for the Picts to scalp as to take you back to Zingara to starve,' said he. 'I know what it is to be penniless in a Hyborian land. Now in my country sometimes there are famines; but people are hungry only when there's no food in the land at all. But in civilized countries I've seen people sick of gluttony while others were starving. Aye, I've seen men fall and die of hunger against the walls of shops and storehouses crammed with food.'

'Sometimes I was hungry, too, but then I took what I wanted at sword's-point. But you can't do that. So you take these rubies. You can sell them and buy a castle, and slaves and fine clothes, and with them it won't be hard to get a husband, because civilized men all desire wives with these possessions.'

'But what of you?'

Conan grinned and indicated the Red Hand drawing swiftly inshore.

'A ship and a crew are all I want. As soon as I set foot on that deck, I'll have a ship, and as soon as I can raise the Barachans I'll have a crew. The lads of the Red Brotherhood are eager to ship with me, because I always lead them to rare loot. And as soon as I've set you and the girl ashore on the Zingaran coast, I'll show the dogs some looting! Nay, nay, no thanks! What are a handful of gems to me, when all the loot of the southern seas will be mine for the grasping?'

THE END