

The Castle of Terror

Before he can bring off his plans for building a black, empire with himself at its head, Conan is thwarted by a succession of natural catastrophes and the intrigues of his enemies among the Bamulas, many of whom resent the rise to power in their tribe of a foreigner, forced to flee, he heads north through the equatorial jungle and across the grassy veldt toward the semicivilized kingdom of Kush.

1. Burning Eyes

BEYOND THE trackless deserts of Stygia lay the vast grasslands of Kush. For over a hundred leagues, there was' naught but endless stretches of thick grass. Here and there a solitary tree rose to break the gently rolling monotony of the veldt: spiny acacias, sword-leaved dragon, trees, emerald-spined lobelias, and thick fingered, poisonous spurges. Now and then a rare stream cut a shallow dell across the prairie, giving rise to a narrow gallery forest along its banks. Herds of zebra, antelope, buffalo, and other denizens of the savanna drifted athwart the veldt, grazing as they went

The grasses whispered and nodded in the wandering winds beneath skies of deep cobalt in which a fierce tropical sun blazed blindingly. Now and then clouds boiled up; a brief thunderstorm roared and blazed with catastrophic fury, only to die and clear as quickly as it had arisen.

Across this limitless waste, as the day died, a lone silent figure trudged. It was a young giant, strongly built, with eliding thews that swelled under a sun-bronzed hide scored with the white traces of old wounds. Deep of chest and broad of shoulder and long of limb was he; his scanty costume of loincloth and sandals revealed his magnificent physique. His chest, shoulders, and back were burnt nearly as black as the natives of this land. The tangled locks of an unkempt mane of coarse black hair framed a grim, impassive face. Beneath scowling black brows, fierce eyes of burning blue roamed restlessly from side to side as he marched with a limber, tireless stride across the level lands. His wary gaze pierced the thick, shadowy grasses on either side, reddened by the angry crimson of sunset. Soon night would come swiftly across Kush; under the gloom of its world-shadowing wings, danger and death would prowl the waste.

Yet the lone traveler, Conan of Cimmeria, was not afraid. A barbarian of barbarians, bred on the bleak hills of distant Cimmeria, the iron endurance and fierce vitality of the wild were his, granting him survival where civilized men, though more learned, more courteous, and more sophisticated than he, would miserably have perished. Although the wanderer had gone afoot for eight days, with no food save the game he had slain with the great Bamula hunting bow slung across his back, the mighty barbarian had nowhere nearly approached the limits of his strength.

Long had Conan been accustomed to the Spartan life of the wilderness. Although he had tasted the languid luxuries of civilized life in half the walled, glittering cities of the world, he missed them not. He plodded on toward the distant horizon, now obscured by a murky purple haze.

Behind him lay the dense jungles of the black lands beyond Kush, where fantastic orchids blazed amid foliage his way for many weary leagues northward, until he reached the region where the crowding forest thinned out and gave way to the open grasslands. Now he meant to cross Ac savanna on foot to reach the kingdom of Kush, where his barbaric strength and the weight of his sword might find him employment in the service of the dusky monarchs of that ancient land.

Suddenly his thoughts were snatched away from contemplation of the past by a thrill of danger. Some primal instinct of survival alerted him to the presence of peril. He halted and stared about him through the long shadows cast by the setting sun. As the hairs of his nape bristled with the touch of unseen menace, the giant barbarian searched the air with sensitive nostrils and probed the gloom with smoldering eyes. Although he could neither see nor smell anything, the mysterious sense of danger of the wilderness-bred told him that peril was near.

He felt the feathery touch of invisible eyes and whirled to glimpse a pair of large orbs, glowing in the gloom.

Almost in the same instant, the blazing eyes vanished. So short had been his glimpse and so utter the disappearance that he was tempted to shrug off the sight as a product of his imagination. He turned and went forward again, but now he was on the alert. As he continued his journey, flaming eyes opened again amid the thick shadows of dense grasses, to follow his silent progress. Tawny, sinuous forms glided after him on soundless feet. The lions of Kush were on his track, lusting for hot blood and fresh flesh.

2. The Circle of Death

An hour later, night had fallen over the savanna, save for a narrow band of sunset glow along the western horizon, against which an occasional small, gnarled tree of the veldt stood up in black silhouette. And Conan almost reached the limits of his endurance. Thrice lionesses had rushed upon him out of the shadows to right or to left. Thrice he had driven them off with the flying death of his arrows.

Although it was hard to shoot straight in the gathering dark, an explosive snarl from the chasing cats had thrice told him of hits, although he had no way of knowing whether he had slain or only wounded the deadly predators.

But now his quiver was empty, and he knew it was only a matter of time before the silent marauders pulled him down.

There were eight or ten lions on his track! Now even the grim barbarian felt a pang of despair. Even if his mighty sword accounted for one or two of the attackers, the rest would tear him into gory pieces before he could slash or thrust again.

Conan had encountered lions before and knew their enormous strength, which enabled them to pick up and drag a whole zebra as easily as a cat does a mouse. Although Conan was one of the strongest men of his time, once a lion got its claws and teeth into him that strength would be no more effective than that of a small child.

Conan ran on. He had been running now for the better part of an hour, with a long, loping stride that ate up the leagues. At first he had run effortlessly, but now the grueling exertions of his flight through the black jungles and his eight-day trek across the plain began to take their toll. His eyes blurred; the muscles of his legs ached. Every beat of his bursting heart seemed to drain away the strength remaining in his giant form.

He prayed to his savage gods for the moon to emerge from the dense, stormy clouds that veiled most of the sky. He prayed for a hillock or a tree to break the gently rolling flatness of the plain, or even a boulder against which he could set his back to make a last stand against the pride.

But the gods heard not. The only trees in this region were dwarfish, thorny growths, which rose to a height of six or eight feet and then spread their branches out horizontally in a mushroom shape. If he managed to climb such a tree despite the thorns, it would be easy for the first lion to reach the base to spring upon him from below and bear him to the ground in one leap. The only hillocks were termite nests, some rising several feet in height but too small for purposes of defense.

There was nothing to do but run on. To lighten himself, he had cast aside the great hunting bow when he had spent his last shaft, although it wrenched his heart to throw away the splendid weapon. Quiver and straps soon followed. He was now stripped to a mere loincloth of leopard hide, the high-laced sandals that clad his feet, his goatskin water bag, and the heavy broadsword, which he now carried scabbarded in one fist. To part with these would mean surrendering his last hope.

The lions were now almost at his heels. He could smell the strong reek of their lithe bodies and hear their panting breath.

Any moment, now, they would, close in upon him, and he would be making his last furious fight for life before they pulled him down.

He expected his pursuers to follow their age-old tactics. The oldest male the chief of the pride would follow directly behind him, with the younger males on either flank. The swifter lionesses would range ahead on either side in a crescent formation until they were far enough ahead of him to close the circle and trap him. Then they would all rush in upon him at once, making any effective defense impossible.

Suddenly, the land was flooded with light. The round, silver eye of the rising moon glared down upon the broad plains, bathing the racing figure of the giant barbarian with her gaze and drawing lines of pale silver fire along the rippling sinews of the lions as they loped at his heels, washing their short, silken fur with her ghostly radiance.

Conan's wary eye caught the moonfire on rippling fur ahead to his left, and he knew that the encirclement was nearly complete. As he braced himself to meet the charge, however, he was astounded to see the same lioness veer off and halt.

In two strides he was past her. As he went, he saw that the young lioness on his right had also stopped short. She squatted motionless on the grass with tail twitching and lashing. A curious sound, half roar and half wail, came from her fanged jaws. |

Conan dared to slow his run and glance back. To his utter astonishment, he saw that the entire pride had halted as if at some invisible barrier. They stood in a snarling line with fangs gleaming like silver in the moonlight. Earth shaking roars of baffled rage came from their throats.

Conan's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and his scowling brows knotted in puzzlement. What had halted the pride at the very moment when they had made sure of their prey?

What unseen force had annulled the fury of the chase? He stood for a moment facing them, sword in hand, wondering if they would resume their charge. But the lions stayed where they were, growling and roaring

from foam-dripping jaws.

Then Conan observed a curious thing. The place where the lions had halted seemed to mark a line of demarcation across the plain. On the further side grew thick, long, lush grasses. At the invisible boundary, however, the grass became thin, stubby, and ill nourished, with broad patches of bare earth. Although Conan could not clearly distinguish colors by moonlight alone, it seemed to him that the grasses on the hither side of the line lacked the normal green color of growing things. Instead, the grasses around his feet seemed dry and gray, as if leached of all vitality.

To either side, in the bright moonlight, he could see the region of dead grasses curve away into the distance, as if he stood alone in a vast circle of death.

3. The Black Citadel

Although he still ached with weariness, the brief pause had given Conan the strength to continue his progress.

Since he did not know the nature of the invisible line that had halted the lions, he could not tell how long this mysterious influence would continue to hold them at bay.

Therefore he preferred to put as much distance between the pride and himself as possible.

Soon he saw a dark mass take form out of the dimness ahead of him. He went forward even more warily than before, sword in hand and eyes searching the hazy immensities of this domain. The moonlight was still brilliant, but its radiance became obscure with distance as if veiled by some

thickening haze. So, at first, Conan could make nothing of the black, featureless mass that lifted out of the plain before him, save for its size and its stillness. Like some colossal idol of primitive devil worship, hewn from a mountain of black stone by some unknown beings in time's dawn, the dark mass squatted motionless amid the dead gray grass. As Conan came nearer, details emerged from the dark, featureless blur.

He saw that it was a tremendous edifice, which lay partly in ruins on the plains of Kusha colossal structure erected by unknown hands for some nameless purpose. It looked like a castle or fortress of some sort, but of an architectural type that Conan had never seen. Made of dense black stone, it rose in a complex facade of pillars and terraces and battlements, whose alignment seemed oddly awry. It baffled the view. The eye followed mind-twisting curves that seemed subtly wrong, weirdly distorted. The huge structure gave the impression of a chaotic lack of order, as if its builders had not been quite sane.

Conan wrenched his gaze from the vertiginous curves of this misshapen mass of masonry, merely to look upon which made him dizzy. He thought he could at last perceive why the beasts of the veldt avoided this crumbling pile. It somehow exuded an aura of menace and horror. Perhaps, during the millennia that the black citadel had squatted on the plains, the animals had come to dread it and to avoid its shadowy precincts, until such habits of avoidance were now instinctive.

The moon dimmed suddenly as high-piled storm clouds again darkened her ageless face. Distant thunder grumbled, and Conan's searching gaze caught the sulfurous flicker of lightning among the boiling masses of cloud. One of those quick, tempestuous thunderstorms of the savanna was about to break.

Conan hesitated. On the one hand, curiosity and a desire for shelter from the coming storm drew him to the ' crumbled stronghold. On the other, his barbarian's mind held a deep-rooted aversion to the supernatural. Toward earthly, mortal dangers he was fearless to the point of rashness, but otherworldly perils could send the tendrils of panic quivering along his nerves. And something about this mysterious structure hinted at the supernatural. He could feel its menace in the deepest layers of his consciousness.

A louder nimble of thunder decided him. Taking an iron grip on his nerves, he strode confidently into the dark portal, naked steel in hand, and vanished within.

4. The Serpent Men

Conan prowled the length of the high-vaulted hall, finding nothing that lived. Dust and dead leaves littered the black pave. Moldering rubbish was heaped in the comers and around the bases of towering stone columns. However old this pile of masonry was, evidently no living thing had dwelt therein for centuries.

The hall, revealed by another brief appearance of ,the moon, was two stories high. A balustrated balcony ran around the second floor. Curious to probe deeper into the mystery of this enigmatic structure which squatted here on the plain many leagues from any other stone building, Conan roamed the corridors, which wound as sinuously as a serpent's track.

He poked into dusty chambers whose original purpose he could not even guess.

The castle was of staggering size, even to one who had seen the temple of the spider-god at Yezud in Zamora and the palace of King Yfldiz at Aghrapur in Turan. A good part of itone whole wing, in fact had fallen into a featureless mass of tumbled black blocks, but the part that remained more or less intact was still the largest building that Conan had seen. Its antiquity was beyond guessing. The black onyx of which it was wrought was unlike any stone that Conan had seen in this part of the world. It must have been brought across immense distanceswhy, Conan could not imagine.

Some features of the bizarre architecture of the structure reminded Conan of ancient tombs in accursed Zamora.

Others suggested forbidden temples that he had glimpsed in far Hyrkania during his mercenary service with the Turanians.

But whether the black castle had been erected primarily as a tomb, a fortress, a palace, or a temple, or some combination of these, he could not tell.

Then, too, there was a disturbing alienage about the castle that made him obscurely uneasy. Even as the facades seemed to have been built according to the canons of some alien geometry, so the interior contained baffling features. The steps of the stairways, for example, were much broader and shallower than was required for human feet. The doorways were too tall and too narrow, so that Conan had to turn sideways to get through them.

The walls were sculptured in low relief with coiling, geometrical arabesques of baffling, hypnotic complexity.

Conan found that he had to wrench his gaze away from the sculptured walls by force of will, lest his mind be entrapped and held by the cryptic symbols formed by the writhing lines.

In fact, everything about this strange, baffling enigma in stone reminded Conan of serpents—the winding corridors, the writhing decoration, and even, he thought, a faint trace of a musky, ophidian odor.

Conan halted, brows knotted. Could this unknown ruin have been raised by the serpent folk of ancient Valussa? The day of that prehuman people lay an unthinkable interval in the past, before the dawn of man himself, in the dim mists of time when giant reptiles ruled the earth. Or ever the Seven Empires arose in the days before the Cataclysm—even before Atlantis arose from the depths of the Western Ocean—the serpent people had reigned. They had vanished long before the coming of man but not entirely.

Around the campfires in the bleak hills of Cimmeria and again in the marbled courts of the temples of Nemedia, Conan had heard the legend of Kull, the Atlantean king of Valusia. The snake people had survived here and there by means of their magic, which enabled them to appear to others as ordinary human beings. But Kull had stumbled upon their secret and had purged his realm clean of their taint, wiping them out with fire and sword.

Still, might not the black castle, with its alien architecture, be a relic of that remote era, when men contended for the rule of the planet with these reptilian survivors of lost ages?

5. Whispering Shadows

The first thunderstorm missed the black castle. There was a brief patter of raindrops on the crumbling stonework and a trickle of water through holes in the roof. Then the lightning and thunder diminished as the storm passed off to westward, leaving the moon to shine unobstructed once more through the gaps in the stone. But other storms followed, muttering and flickering out of the east. Conan slept uneasily in a corner of the balcony above the great hall, tossing and turning like some wary animal that dimly senses the approach of danger. Caution had made him suspicious of sleeping in the hall before the wide-open doors. Even though the circle of death seemed to bar the denizens of the plains, he did not trust the unseen force that held the beasts at bay.

A dozen times he started awake, clutching at his sword and probing the soft shadows with his eyes, searching for whatever had aroused him. A dozen times he found nothing in the gloomy vastness of the ancient wreck. Each time he composed himself for slumber again, however, dim shadows clustered around him, and he half-heard whispering voices.

Growling a weary curse to his barbaric gods, the Cimmerian damned all shadows and echoes to

the eleven scarlet Hells of his mythology and threw himself down again, striving to slumber. At length he fell into a deep sleep. And in that sleep there came upon him a strange dream.

It seemed that, although his body slept, his spirit waked and was watchful. To the immaterial eyes of his ka, as the Stygians called it, the gloomy balcony was filled with a dim glow of blood-hued light from some unseen source. This was neither the silvery sheen of the moon, which cast slanting beams into the hall through gaps in the stone, nor the pallid Bicker of distant lightning. By sanguine radiance, Conan's spirit could see drifting shadows, which flitted like cloudy bats among the black marble column shadows with glaring eyes filled with mindless hunger shadows that whispered in an all but audible cacophony of mocking laughter and bestial cries.

Conan's spirit somehow knew that these whispering shadows were the ghosts of thousands of sentient beings who had died within this ancient structure. How he knew this, he could not say, but to his ka it was a plain fact. The unknown people who had raised this enormous ruin

whether the serpent men of Valusian legend or some other forgotten race had drenched the marble altars of the black castle with the blood of thousands. The ghosts of their victims were chained forever to this castle of terror. Perhaps they were held earthbound by some powerful spell of prehuman sorcery. Perhaps it was the same spell that kept out the beasts of the veldt.

But this was not all. The ghosts of the black castle hungered for the blood of the living for the blood of Conan.

His exhausted body lay chained in ensorcelled slumber while shadowy phantoms flitted about him, tearing at him with impalpable fingers. But a spirit cannot harm a living being unless it first manifests itself on the physical plane and assumes material form. These gibbering shadow hordes were weak. Not for years had a man defied the ancient curse to set foot within the black castle, enabling them to feed. Enfeebled by long starvation, they could no longer easily materialize into a shambling horde of ghoul-things.

Somehow, the spirit of the dreaming Conan knew this. While his body slept on, his ka observed movements on the astral plane and watched the vampiric shadows as they beat insubstantial wings about his sleeping head and slashed with impalpable claws at his pulsing throat. But for all their voiceless frenzy, they could harm him not. Bound by the spell, he slept on.

After an indefinite time, a change took place in the ruddy luminance of the astral plane. The specters were clustering together into a shapeless mass of thickening shadows.

Mindless dead things though they were, hunger drove them into an uncanny alliance. Each ghost possessed a small store of that vital energy that went toward bodily materialization.

Now each phantom mingled its slim supply of energy with that of its shadowy brethren.

Gradually, a terrible shape, fed by the life force of ten thousand ghosts, began to materialize. In the dim gloom of the black marble balcony, it slowly formed out of a swirling cloud of shadowy particles.

And Conan slept on.

6. The Hundred Heads

Thunder crashed deafeningly, lightning blazed with sulfurous fires above the darkened plain, whence the moonlight had fled again. The thick-piled storm clouds burst, soaking the grassy swales with a torrential downpour.

The Stygian slave raiders had ridden all night, pressing southward toward the forests beyond Kush. Their expedition had thus far been fruitless; not one black of the nomadic hunting and herding tribes of the savanna had fallen into their hands. Whether war or pestilence had swept the land bare

of humankind, or whether the tribesmen, warned of the coming of the slavers, had fled beyond reach, they did not know.

In any case, it seemed that they would do better among the lush jungles of the South. The forest Negroes dwelt in permanent villages, which the slavers could surround and take by surprise with a quick dawn rush, catching the inhabitants like fish in a net. Villagers too old, too young, or too sickly to endure the trek back to Stygia they would slay out of hand. Then they would drive the remaining wretches, fettered together to form a human chain, northward.

There were forty Stygians, well-mounted warriors in helms and chain-mail hauberks. They were tall, swarthy, hawk-faced men, powerfully muscled. They were hardened marauders tough, shrewd, fearless, and merciless, with no more compunction about killing a non-Stygian than most men have about slipping a gnat

Now the first downpour of the storm swept their column.

Winds whipped their woolen cloaks and linen robes and blew their horses manes into their faces. The almost continuous blaze of lightning dazzled them.

Their leader sighted the black castle, looming above the grasslands, for the blazing lightning made it visible in the rain-veiled dark. He shouted a guttural command and drove his spurs into the ribs of his big black mare. The others spurred after him and rode up to the frowning bastions with a clatter of hoofs, a creaking of leather, and a jingle of mail. In the blur of rain and night, the abnormality of the facade was not visible, and the Stygians were eager to get under shelter before they were soaked.

They came stamping in, cursing and bellowing and shaking the water from their cloaks. In a trice, the gloomy silence of the ruin was broken with a clamor of noise. Brushwood and dead leaves were gathered; flint and steel were struck. Soon a smoking, sputtering fire leaped up in the midst of the cracked marble floor, to paint the sculptured walls with rich orange.

The men flung down their saddlebags, stripped off wet burnouses, and spread them to dry. They struggled out of their coats of mail and set to rubbing the moisture from them with oily rags. They opened their saddlebags

and sank strong white teeth into round loaves of hard, stale bread.

Outside, the storm bellowed and flashed. Streams of rainwater, like little waterfalls, poured through gaps in the masonry. But the Stygians heeded them not.

On the balcony above, Conan stood silently, awake but trembling with shudders that wracked his powerful body.

With the cloudburst, the spell that held him captive had broken. Starting up, he glared about for the shadowy conclave of ghosts that he had seen form in his dream.

When the lightning flashed, he thought he glimpsed a dark, amorphous form at the far end of the balcony, but he did not care to go closer to investigate.

While he pondered the problem of how to quit the balcony without coming in reach of the Thing, the Stygians came stamping and roaring in. They were hardly an improvement on the ghosts. Given half a chance, they would be delighted to capture him for their slave gang. For all his immense strength and skill at arms, Conan knew that no man can fight forty well-armed foes at once. Unless he instantly cut his way out and escaped, they would bring him down. He faced either a swift death or / a bitter life of groaning drudgery in a Stygian slave pen. He was not sure which he preferred.

If the Stygians distracted Conan's attention from the phantoms, they likewise distracted the attention of the phantoms from Conan. In their mindless hunger, the shadow-things ignored the Cimmerian in favor of the forty Stygians encamped below. Here was living flesh and vital force

enough to glut their phantasmal lusts thrice over. Like autumn leaves, they drifted over the balustrade and down from the balcony into the hall below.

The Stygians sprawled around their fire, passing a bottle of wine from hand to hand and talking in their guttural tongue.

Although Conan knew only a few words of Stygian, from the intonations and gestures he could follow the course of the argument. The leader, a clean-shaven giant, as tall as the Cimmerians swore that he would not venture into the downpour on such a night. They would await the dawn in this crumbling ruin. At least, the roof seemed to be still sound in places, and a man could here out of the drip.

When several more bottles had been emptied, the Stygians, now warm and dry, composed themselves for sleep. The fire burned low, for the brushwood with which they fed it could not long sustain a strong blaze. The leader pointed to one of his men and spoke a harsh sentence. The man protested, but after some argument he heaved himself up with a groan and pulled on his coat of mail. He, Conan realized, had been chosen to stand the first watch. |

Presently, with sword in hand and shield on arm, the sentry was standing in the shadows at the margin of the light of the dying fire. From time to time he walked slowly up and down the length of the hall, pausing to peer into the winding corridors or out through the front doors, where the storm was in retreat.

While the sentry stood in the main doorway with his back to his comrades, a grim shape formed among the snoring band of slavers. It grew slowly out of wavering clouds of insubstantial shadows. The compound creature that gradually took shape was made up of the vital force of thousands of dead beings. It became a ghastly form, a huge bulk that sprouted countless malformed limbs and appendages. A dozen squat legs supported its monstrous weight. From its top, like grisly fruit, sprouted scores of heads: some lifelike, with shaggy hair and brows; others mere lumps in which eyes, ears, mouths, and nostrils were arranged at random.

The sight of the hundred-headed monster in that dimly firelit ball was enough to freeze the blood of the stoutest with terror. Conan felt his nape hairs rise and his skin crawl with revulsion as he stared down upon the scene.

The thing lurched across the floor. Leaning unsteadily down, it clutched one of the Stygians with half a dozen grasping claws. As the man awoke with a scream, the nightmare thing tore its victim apart, spattering his sleeping comrades with gory, dripping fragments of the man.

7. Flight from Nightmare

In an instant, the Stygians were on their feet. Hardbitten ravagers though they were, the sight was frightful enough to wring yells of terror from some. Wheeling at the first scream, the sentry rushed back into the hall to hack at the monster with his sword. Bellowing commands, the leader snatched up the nearest weapon and fell to. The rest, although unarmored, disheveled, and confused, seized sword and spear to defend themselves against the shape that shambled and slew among them.

Swords hacked into misshapen thighs; spears plunged into the swollen, swaying belly. Clutching hands and arms were hacked away to thud, jerking and grasping, to the floor. But, seeming to reel no pain, the monster snatched up man after man. Some Stygians had their heads twisted off by strangling hands. Others were seized by the feet and battered to gory remnants against the pillars.

As the Cimmerian watched from above, a dozen Stygians were battered or torn to death. The ghastly wounds inflicted on the monster by the weapons of the Stygians instantly closed up and healed. Severed heads and arms were replaced by new members, which sprouted from the bulbous body.

Seeing that the Stygians had no chance against the monster, Conan resolved to take his leave while the Thing was still occupied with the slavers and before it turned its attention to him. Thinking it unwise to enter the hall, he sought a more direct exit. He climbed out through a window. This led on to a roof terrace of broken tiles, where a false step could drop him through a gap in the pavement to ground level.

The rain had slackened to a drizzle. The moon, now nearly overhead, showed intermittent beams again. Looking down from the parapet that bounded the terrace, Conan found a place where the exterior carvings, together with climbing vines, provided means of descent. With the lithe grace of an ape, he lowered himself hand over hand down the weirdly carved facade.

Now the moon glazed out in full glory, lighting the courtyard below where the Stygians' horses stood tethered, moving and whinnying uneasily at the sounds of mortal combat that came from the great hall. Over the roar of battle sounded screams of agony as man after man was torn limb from limb.

Conan dropped, landing lightly on the earth of the courtyard. He sprinted for the great black mare that had belonged to the leader of the slavers. He would have liked to linger to loot the bodies, for he needed their armor and other supplies. The mail shirt he had worn as Belit's piratical partner had long since succumbed to wear and rust, and his flight from Bamula had been too hasty to allow him to equip himself more completely. But no force on earth could have drawn him into that "hall, where a horror of living death still stalked and slew.

As the young Cimmerian untethered the horse he had chosen, a screaming figure burst from the entrance and came pelting across the courtyard toward him. Conan saw that it was the man who had stood the first sentry-go. The Stygian's helmet and mail shirt had protected him just enough to enable him to survive the massacre of his comrades.

Conan opened his mouth to speak. There was no love lost between him and the Stygian people; nevertheless, if this Stygian were the only survivor of his party, Conan would have been willing to form a rogues' alliance with him, however temporary, until they could reach more settled country.

But Conan had no chance to make such a proposal, for the experience had driven the burly Stygian mad. His eyes blazed wildly in the moonlight, and foam dripped from his lips. He rushed straight upon Conan, whirling a scimitar so that the moonlight flashed upon it and shrieking, "Back to your hell, O demon!"

The primitive survival instinct of the wilderness-bred Cimmerian flashed into action without conscious thought. By the time the man was within striking distance, Conan's own sword had cleared its scabbard. Again and again, steel clanged against steel, striking sparks. As the wild-eyed Stygian swung back for another slash, Conan drove his point into the madman's throat. The Stygian gurgled, swayed, and toppled.

For an instant, Conan leaned on the mare's saddle bow, panting. The duel had been short but fierce, and the Stygian had been no mean antagonist. From within the ancient pile of stone, no more cries of terror rang. There was naught but an ominous silence. Then Conan heard slow, heavy, shuffling footsteps. Had the ogreish thing slaughtered them all? Was it dragging its misshapen bulk toward the door, to emerge into the courtyard?

Conan did not wait to find out. With trembling fingers he unlaced the dead man's hauberk and pulled the mail shirt off. He also collected the Stygian's helmet and shield, the latter made from the hide of one of the great, thick-skinned beasts of the veldt. He hastily tied these trophies to the saddle, vaulted upon the steed, wrenched at the reins, and kicked the mare's ribs. He galloped out of the ruined courtyard into the region of withered grass. With every stride of the flying hoofs, the castle of

ancient evil fen behind.

Somewhere beyond the circle of dead grass, perhaps the hungry lions still prowled. But Conan did not care. After the ghostly horrors of the black citadel, he would gladly take his chances with mere lions.