

WOLVES BEYOND THE BORDER

By Robert E. Howard

1

It was the mutter of a drum that awakened me. I lay still amidst the bushes where I had taken refuge, straining my ears to locate it, for such sounds are illusive in the deep forest. In the dense woods about me there was no sound. Above me the tangled vines and brambles bent close to form a massed roof, and above them there loomed the higher, gloomier arch of the branches of the great trees. Not a star shone through that leafy vault. Low-hanging clouds seemed to press down upon the very tree-tops. There was no moon. The night was dark as a witch's hate.

The better for me. If I could not see my enemies, neither could they see me. But the whisper of that ominous drum stole through the night: thrum! thrum! thrum!, a steady monotone that grunted and growled of nameless secrets. I could not mistake the sound. Only one drum in the world makes just that deep, menacing, sullen thunder: a Pictish war-drum, in the hands of those wild painted savages who haunted the Wilderness beyond the border of the Westermarck.

And I was beyond that border, alone, and concealed in a brambly covert in the midst of the great forest where those naked fiends have reigned since Time's earliest dawns.

Now I located the sound; the drum was beating westward of my position and I believed at no great distance. Quickly I girt my belt more firmly, settled war-ax and knife in their beaded sheaths, strung my heavy bow and made sure that my quiver was in place at my left hip - groping with my fingers in the yutter darkness - and then I crawled from the thicket and went warily toward the sound of the drum.

That it personally concerned me I did not believe. If the forest-men had discovered me, their discovery would have been announced by a sudden knife in my throat, not by a drum beating in the distance. But the throb of the war-drum had a significance no forest-runner could ignore. It was a warning and a threat, a promise of doom for those white-skinned invaders whose lonely cabins and ax-marked clearings menaced the immemorial solitude of the wilderness. It meant fire and torture, flaming arrows dropping like falling stars through the darkness, and the red ax crunching through skulls of men and women and children.

So through the blackness of the nighted forest I went, feeling my way delicately among the mighty boles, sometimes creeping on hands and knees, and now and

then my heart in my throat when a creeper brushed across my face or groping hand. For there are huge serpents in that forest which sometimes hang by their tails from branches and so snare their prey. But the creatures I sought were more terrible than any serpent, and as the drum grew louder I went as cautiously as if I trod on naked swords. And presently I glimpsed a red gleam among the trees, and heard a mutter of barbaric voices mingling with the snarl of the drum.

Whatever weird ceremony might be taking place yonder under the black trees, it was likely that they had outposts scattered about the place, and I knew how silent and motionless a Pict could stand, merging with the natural forest growth even in dim light, and unsuspected until his blade was through his victim's heart. My flesh crawled at the thought of colliding with one such grim sentry in the darkness, and I drew my knife and held it extended before me. But I knew not even a Pict could see me in that blackness of tangled forest-roof and the cloudmassed sky.

The light revealed itself as a fire before which black silhouettes moved like black devils against the red fires of hell, and presently I crouched close among the dense tamarack and looked into a black-walled glade and the figures that moved therein.

There were forty or fifty Picts, naked but for loin-cloths, and hideously painted, who squatted in a wide semi-circle, facing the fire, with their backs to me. By the hawk feathers in their thick black manes, I knew them to be of the Hawk Clan, or Onayaga. In the midst of the glade there was a crude altar made of rough stones heaped together, and at the sight of this my flesh crawled anew. For I had seen these Pictish altars before, all charred with fire and stained with blood, in empty forest glades, and though I had never witnessed the rituals wherein these things were used, I had heard the tales told about them by men who had been captives among the Picts, or spied upon them even as I was spying.

A feathered shaman was dancing between the fire and the altar, a slow, shuffling dance indescribably grotesque, which caused his plumes to swing and sway about him: his features were hidden by a grinning scarlet mask that looked like a forestdevil's face.

In the midst of the semi-circle of warriors squatted one with the great drum between his knees and as he smote it with his clenched fist it gave forth that low, growling rumble which is like the mutter of distant thunder.

Between the warriors and the dancing shaman stood one who was no Pict. For he was tall as I, and his skin was light in the play of the fire. But he was clad only in doeskin loin-clout and moccasins, and his body was painted, and there was a hawkfeather in his hair, so I knew he must be a Ligurean, one of those light-skinned savages who dwell in small clans in the great forest, generally at war with the Picts, but sometimes at peace and allied with them. Their skins are white as an

Aquilonian's. The Picts are a white race too, in that they are not black nor brown nor yellow, but they are black-eyed and black-haired and dark of skin, and neither they nor the Ligureans are spoken of as 'white' by the people of Westermarck, who only designate thus a man of Hyborian blood.

Now as I watched I saw three warriors drag a man into the ring of the firelight - another Pict, naked and bloodstained, who still wore in his tangled mane a feather that identified him as a member of the Raven Clan, with whom the Hawkmen were ever at war. His captors cast him down upon the altar, bound hand and foot, and I saw his muscles swell and writhe in the firelight as he sought in vain to break the rawhide thongs which prisoned him.

Then the shaman began dancing again, weaving intricate patterns about the altar, and the man upon it, and he who beat the drum wrought himself into a fine frenzy, thundering away like one possessed of a devil. And suddenly, down from an overhanging branch dropped one of those great serpents of which I have spoken. The firelight glistened on its scales as it writhed toward the altar, its beady eyes glittered, and its forked tongue darted in and out, but the warriors showed no fear, though it passed within a few feet of some of them. And that was strange, for ordinarily these serpents are the only living creatures a Pict fears.

The monster reared its head up on arched neck above the altar, and it and the shaman faced one another across the prone body of the prisoner. The shaman danced with a writhing of body and arms, scarcely moving his feet, and as he danced, the great serpent danced with him, weaving and swaying as though mesmerized, and from the mask of the shaman rose a weird wailing that shuddered like the wind through the dry reeds along the sea-marshes. And slowly the great reptile reared higher and higher, and began looping itself about the altar and the man upon it, until his body was hidden by its shimmering folds, and only his head was visible with that other terrible head swaying close above it.

The shrilling of the shaman rose to a crescendo of infernal triumph, and he cast something into the fire. A great green cloud of smoke billowed up and rolled about the altar, so that it almost hid the pair upon it, making their outlines indistinct and illusive. But in the midst of that cloud I saw a hideous writhing and changing - those outlines melted and flowed together horribly, and for a moment I could not tell which was the serpent and which the man. A shuddering sigh swept over the assembled Picts like a wind moaning through nighted branches.

Then the smoke cleared and man and snake lay limply on the altar, and I thought both were dead. But the shaman seized the neck and let the great reptile ooze to the ground, and he tumbled the body of the man from the stones to fall beside the monster, and cut the rawhide thongs that bound wrist and ankle.

Then he began a weaving dance about them, chanting as he danced and swaying his arms in mad gestures. And presently the man moved. But he did not rise. His head swayed from side to side, and I saw his tongue dart out and in again. And Mitra, he began to wriggle away from the fire, squirming along on his belly, as a snake crawls!

And the serpent was suddenly shaken with convulsions and arched its neck and reared up almost its full length, and then fell back, loop on loop and reared up again vainly, horribly like a man trying to rise and stand and walk upright after being deprived of his limbs.

The wild howling of the Picts shook the night, and I was sick where I crouched among the bushes, and fought an urge to retch. I understood the meaning of this ghastly ceremony now. I had heard tales of it. By black, primordial sorcery that spawned and throve in the depths of this black primal forest, that painted shaman had transferred the soul of a captured enemy into the foul body of a serpent. It was the revenge of a fiend. And the screaming of the blood-mad Picts was like the yelling of all Hell's demons.

And the victims writhed and agonized side by side, the man and the serpent, until a sword flashed in the hand of the shaman and both heads fell together - and gods, it was the serpent's trunk which but quivered and jerked a little and then lay still, and the man's body which rolled and knotted and thrashed like a beheaded snake. A deathly faintness and weakness took hold of me, for what white man could watch such black diabolism unmoved? And these painted savages, smeared with war-paint howling and posturing and triumphing over the ghastly doom of a foe, seemed not humans at all to me, but foul fiends of the black world whom it was a duty and an obligation to slay.

The shaman sprang up and faced the ring of warriors, and, ripping off his mask, thrust up his head and howled like a wolf. And as the firelight fell full on his face, I recognized him, and with that recognition all horror and revulsion gave place to red rage, and all thought of personal peril and the recollection of my mission, which was my first obligation, was swept away. For that shaman was old Teyanoga of the South Hawks, he who burnt alive my friend, Jon Galter's son.

In the lust of my hate I acted almost instinctively - whipped up my bow, notched an arrow and loosed, all in an instant. The firelight was uncertain, but the range was not great, and we of the Westermarck live by twang of bow. Old Teyanoga yowled like a cat and reeled back and his warriors howled with amazement to see a shaft quivering suddenly in his breast. The tall, light-skinned warrior wheeled, and for the first time I saw his face - and Mitra, he was a white man!

The horrid shock of that surprise held me paralysed for a moment and had almost

undone me. For the Picts instantly sprang up and rushed into the forest, like panthers, seeking the foe who fired that arrow. They had reached the first fringe of bushes when I jerked out of my spell of amaze and horror, and sprang up and raced away in the darkness, ducking and dodging among trees which I avoided more by instinct than otherwise, for it was dark as ever. But I knew the Picts could not strike my trail, but must hunt as blindly as I fled. And presently, as I ran northward, behind me I heard a hideous howling whose bloodmad fury was enough to freeze the blood even of a forestrunner. And I believed that they had plucked my arrow from the shaman's breast and discovered it to be a white man's shaft. That would bring them after me with fiercer blood-lust than ever.

I fled on, my heart pounding from fear and excitement, and the horror of the nightmare I had witnessed. And that a white man, a Hyborian, should have stood there as a welcome and evidently honored guest - for he was armed - I had seen knife and hatchet at his belt - was so monstrous I wondered if, after all, the whole thing were a nightmare. For never before had a white man observed The Dance of the Changing Serpent save as a prisoner, or a spy, as I had. And what monstrous thing it portended I knew not, but I was shaken with foreboding and horror at the thought.

And because of my horror I went more carelessly than is my wont, seeking haste at the expense of stealth, and occasionally blundering into a tree I could have avoided had I taken more care. And I doubt not it was the noise of this blundering progress which brought the Pict upon me, for he could not have seen me in that pitch-darkness.

Behind me sounded no more yells, but I knew that the Picts were ranging like fire-eyed wolves through the forest, spreading in a vast semi-circle and combing it as they ran. That they had not picked up my trail was evidenced by their silence, for they never yell except when they believe only a short dash is ahead of them, and feel sure of their prey.

The warrior who heard the sounds of my flight could not have been one of that party, for he was too far ahead of them. He must have been a scout ranging the forest to guard against his comrades being surprised from the north.

At any rate he heard me running close to him, and came like a devil of the black night. I knew of him first only by the swift faint pad of his naked feet, and when I wheeled I could not even make out the dim bulk of him, but only heard the soft thudding of those inexorable feet coming to me unseen in the darkness.

They see like cats in the dark, and I know he saw well enough to locate me, though doubtless I was only a dim blur in the darkness. But my blindly upswung hatchet met his falling knife and he impaled himself on my knife as he lunged in,

his death-yell ringing like a peal of doom under the forest-roof. And it was answered by a ferocious clamor to the south, only a few hundred yards away, and then they were racing through the bushes giving tongue like wolves, certain of their quarry.

I ran for it in good earnest now, abandoning stealth entirely for the sake of speed, and trusting to luck that I would not dash out my brains against a tree-stem in the darkness.

But here the forest opened up somewhat; there was no underbrush, and something almost like light filtered in through the branches, for the clouds were clearing a little. And through this forest I fled like a damned soul pursued by demons, hearing the yells at first rising higher and higher in blood-thirsty triumph, then edged with anger and rage as they grew fainter and fell away behind me, for in a straight-away race no Pict can match the long legs of a white forest-runner. The desperate risk was that there were other scouts or war-parties ahead of me who could easily cut me off, hearing my flight; but it was a risk I had to take. But no painted figures started up like phantoms out of the shadows ahead of me, and presently, through the thickening growth that betokened the nearness of a creek, I saw a glimmer through the trees far ahead of me and knew it was the light of Fort Kwanyara, the southernmost outpost of Schohira.

2

Perhaps, before continuing 'with this chronicle of the bloody years, it might be well were I to give an account of myself, and the reason why I traversed the Pictish Wilderness, by night and alone.

My name is Gault Hagar's son. I was born in the province of Conajohara. But when I was ten years of age, the Picts broke over Black River and stormed Fort Tuscelan and slew all within save one man, and drove all the settlers of the province east of Thunder River. Conajohara became again part of the Wilderness, haunted only by wild beasts and wild men. The people of Conajohara scattered throughout the Westermarck, in Schohira, Conawaga, or Oriskawny, but many of them went southward and settled near Fort Thandara, an isolated outpost on the Warhorse River, my family among them. There they were later joined by other settlers for whom the older provinces were too thickly inhabited, and presently there grew up the district known as the Free Province of Thandara, because it was not like the other provinces, royal grants to great lords east of the marches and settled by them, but cut out of the wilderness by the pioneers themselves without aid of the Aquiloman nobility. We paid no taxes to any baron. Our governor was not appointed by any lord, but we elected him ourselves, from our own people, and he

was responsible only to the king. We manned and built our forts ourselves, and sustained ourselves in war as in peace. And Mitra knows war was a constant state of affairs, for there was never peace between us and our savage neighbors, the wild Panther, Alligator and Otter tribes of Picts.

But we throve, and seldom questioned what went on east of the marches in the kingdom whence our grandsires had come. But at last events in Aquilonia did touch upon us in the

wilderness. Word came of civil war, and a fighting man risen to wrest the throne from the ancient dynasty. And sparks from that conflagration set the frontier ablaze, and turned neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother. And it was because knights in their gleaming steel were fighting and slaying on the plains of Aquilonia that I was hastening alone through the stretch of wilderness that separated Thandara from Schohira, with news that might well change the destiny of all the Westermarck.

Fort Kwanyara was a small outpost, a square fortress of hewn logs with a palisade on the bank of Knife Creek. I saw its banner streaming against the pale rose of the morning sky, and noted that only the ensign of the province floated there. The royal standard that should have risen above it, flaunting the golden serpent, was not in evidence. That might mean much, or nothing. We of the frontier are careless about the delicate punctilios of custom and etiquette which mean so much to the knights beyond the marches.

I crossed Knife Creek in the early dawn, wading through the shallows, and was challenged by a picket on the other bank, a tall man in the buckskins of a ranger. When he knew I was from Thandara: 'By Mitra!' quoth he, 'your business must be urgent, that you cross the wilderness instead of taking the longer road.'

For Thandara was separated from the other provinces, as I have said, and the Little Wilderness lay between it and the Bossonian marches; but a safe road ran through it into the marches and thence to the other provinces but it was a long and tedious road.

Then he asked for news from Thandara, but I told him I knew little of the latest events, having just returned from a long scout into the country of the Ottermen, which was a lie, but I had no way of knowing Schohira's political color, and was not inclined to betray my own until I knew. Then I asked him if Hakon Strom's son was in Fort Kwanyara, and he told me that the man I sought was not in the fort, but was at the town of Schondara, which lay a few miles east of the fort.

'I hope Thandara declares for Conan,' said he with an oath, 'for I tell you plainly it is our political complexion. And it is my cursed luck which keeps me here with the

handful of rangers who watch the border for raiding Picts. I would give my bow and hunting shirt to be with your army which lies even now at Thenitea on Ogaha Creek waiting the onslaught of Brocas of Toth with his damned renegades.'

I said naught but was astounded. This was news indeed. For the Baron of Toth was lord of Conawaga, not Schohira, whose patron was Lord Thasperas of Kormon.

'Where is Thasperas?' I asked, and the ranger answered, a thought shortly: 'Away in Aquilonia, fighting for Conan.' And he looked at me narrowly as if he had begun to wonder if I were a spy.

'Is there a man in Schohira,' I began, 'who has such connections with the Picts that he dwells, naked and painted among them, and attends their ceremonies of blood-feast and-'

I checked myself at the fury that contorted the Schohiran's features.

'Damn you,' says he, choking with passion, 'what is your purpose in coming here to insult us thus?'

And indeed, to call a man a renegade was the direst insult that could be offered along the Westermarck, though I had not meant it in that way. But I saw the man was ignorant of any knowledge concerning the renegade I had seen, and not wishing to give out information, I merely told him that he misunderstood my meaning.

'I understand it well enough,' said he, shaking with passion. 'But for your dark skin and southern accent I would deem you a spy from Conawaga. But spy or no, you cannot insult the men of Schohira in such manner. Were I not on military duty I would lay down my weapon-belt and show you what manner of men we breed in Schohira.'

'I want no quarrel,' said I. 'But I am going to Schondara, where it will not be hard for you to find me, if you so desire.'

'I will be there anon,' quoth he grimly. 'I am Storm Grom's son and they know me in Schohira.'

I left him striding his post along the bank, and fingering his knife hilt and hatchet as if he itched to try their edge on my head, and I swung wide of the small fort to avoid other scouts or pickets. For in these troublous times suspicion might fall on me as a spy very easily. Nay, this Storm Grom's son was beginning to turn such thoughts in his thick noddle when they were swept away by his personal

resentment at what he mistook for a slur. And having quarreled with me, his sense of personal honor would not allow him to arrest me on suspicion of being a spy - even had he thought of it. In ordinary times none would think of halting or questioning a white man crossing the border - but everything was in a mad whirl now - it must be, if the patrol of Conawaga was invading the domain of his neighbors.

The forest had been cleared about the fort for a few hundred yards in each direction, forming a solid green wall. I kept within this wall as I skirted the clearing, and met no one, even when I crossed several paths leading from the fort. I avoided clearings and farms. I headed eastward and the sun was not high in the heavens when I sighted the roofs of Schondara.

The forest ran to within less than half a mile of the town, which was a handsome one for a frontier village, with neat houses mostly of squared logs, some painted, but also some fine frame buildings which is something we have not in Thandara. But there was not so much as a ditch or a palisade about the village, which was strange to me. For we of Thandara build our dwelling places for defense as much as shelter, and while there is not a village in the width and breadth of the province, yet every cabin is like a tiny fort.

Off to the right of the village stood a fort, in the midst of a meadow, with palisade and ditch, somewhat larger than Fort Kwanyara, but I saw few heads moving above the parapet, either helmeted or capped. And only the spreading winged hawk of Schohira flapped on the standard. And I wondered why, if Schohira were for Conan, they did not fly the banner he had chosen - the golden lion on a black field, the standard of the regiment he commanded as a mercenary general of Aquilonia.

Away to the left, at the edge of the forest I saw a large house of stone set amid gardens and orchards, and knew it for the estate of Lord Valerian, the richest landowner in western Schohira. I had never seen the man, but knew he was wealthy and powerful. But now the Hall, as it was called, seemed deserted.

The town seemed curiously deserted, likewise; at least of men, though there were women and children in plenty, and it seemed to me that the men had assembled their families here for safety. I saw few able-bodied men. As I went up the street many eyes followed me suspiciously, but none spoke except to reply briefly to my questions.

At the tavern only a few old men and cripples huddled about the ale-stained tables and conversed in low tones, all conversation ceasing as I loomed in the doorway in my worn buckskins, and all turned to stare at me silently.

More significant silence when I asked for Hakon Strom's son, and the host told me that Hakon was ridden to Thenitea shortly after sun-up, where the militia-army lay encamped, but would return shortly. So being hungry and weary, I ate a meal in the taproom, aware of those questioning eyes fixed on me, and then lay down in a corner on a bear skin the host fetched for me, and slept. And was so slumbering when Hakon Strom's son returned, close upon sunset.

He was a tall man, rangy and broad-shouldered, like most Westlanders, and clad in buckskin hunting shirt and fringed leggings and moccasins like myself. Half a dozen rangers were with him, and they sat them down at a board close to the door and watched him and me over the rims of their ale jacks.

When I named myself and told him I had word for him, he looked at me closely, and bade me sit with him at a table in the corner where mine host brought us ale foaming in leathern jacks.

'Has no word come through of the state of affairs in Thandara?' I asked.

'No sure word; only rumors.'

'Very well,' I said. 'I bring you word from Brant Drago's son, governor of Thandara, and the council of captains, and by this sign you shall know me for a true man.' And so saying I dipped my finger in the foamy ale and with it drew a symbol on the table, and instantly erased it. He nodded, his eyes blazing with interest.

'This is the word I bring you,' quoth I; 'Thandara has declared for Conan and stands ready to aid his friends and defy his enemies.'

At that he smiled joyfully and grasped my brown hand warmly with his own rugged fingers.

'Good!' he exclaimed. 'But it is no more than I expected.'

'What man of Thandara could forget Conan?' said I. 'Nay, I was but a child in Conajohara, but I remember him when he was a forest-runner and a scout there. When his rider came into Thandara telling us that Poitain was in revolt, with Conan striking for the throne, and asking our support - he asked no volunteers for his army, merely our loyalty - we sent him one word: "We have not forgotten Conajohara." Then came the Baron Attelius over the marches against us, but we ambushed him in the Little Wilderness and cut his army to pieces. And now I think we need fear no invasion in Thandara.'

'I would I could say as much for Schohira,' he said grimly. 'Baron Thasperas sent us word that we could do as we chose he has declared for Conan and joined the

rebel army. But he did not demand western levies. Nay, both he and Conan know the Westermarck needs every man it has to guard the border.

'He removed his troops from the forts, however, and we manned them with our own foresters. There was some little skirmishing among ourselves, especially in the towns like Goyaga, where dwell the land-holders, for some of them held to Namedides - well, these loyalists either fled away to Conawaga with their retainers, or else surrendered and gave their pledge to remain neutral in their castles, like Lord Valerian of Schondara. The loyalists who fled swore to return and cut all our throats. And presently Lord Brocas marched over the border.

'In Conawaga the land-owners and Brocas are for Namedides, and we have heard pitiful tales of their treatment of the common people who favor Conan.'

I nodded, not surprised. Conawaga was the largest, richest and most thickly settled province in all the Westermarck, and it had a comparatively large, and very powerful class of titled landholders - which we have not in Thandara, and by the favor of Mitra, never shall.

'It is an open invasion for conquest,' said Hakon. 'Brocas commanded us to swear loyalty to Namedides - the dog. I think the black-jowled fool plots to subdue all the Westermarck and rule it as Namedides' viceroy. With an army of Aquilonian men-at-arms, Bossoman archers, Conawaga loyalists, and Schohira renegades, he lies at Coyaga, ten miles beyond Ogaha Creek. Thenitea is full of refugees from the eastern country he has devastated.

'We do not fear him, though we are outnumbered. He must cross Ogaha Creek to strike us, and we have fortified the west bank and blocked the road against his cavalry.'

'That touches upon my mission,' I said. 'I am authorized to offer the services of a hundred and fifty Thandaran rangers. We are all of one mind in Thandara and fight no internal wars; and we can spare that many men from our war with the Panther Picts.,

'That will be good news for the commandant of Fort Kwanyara!'

'What?' quoth I. 'Are you not the commandant?'

'Nay,' said he, 'it is my brother Dirk Strom's son.'

'Had I known that I would have given my message to him,' I said. 'Brant Drago's son thought you commanded Kwanyara. However, it does not matter.'

'Another jack of ale,' quoth Hakon, 'and we'll start for the fort so that Dirk shall hear your news first-hand. A plague on commanding a fort. A party of scouts is good enough for me.'

And in truth Hakon was not the man to command an outpost or any large body of men, for he was too reckless and hasty, though a brave man and a gay rogue.

'You have but a skeleton force left to watch the border,' I said. 'What of the Picts?'

'They keep the peace to which they swore,' answered he. 'For some months there has been peace along the border, except for the usual skirmishing between individuals of both races.'

'Valerian Hall seemed deserted.'

'Lord Valerian dwells there alone except for a few servants. Where his fighting men have gone, none knows. But he has sent them off. If he had not given his pledge we would have felt it necessary to place him under guard, for he is one of the few white men to whom the Picts give heed. If it had entered his head to stir them up against our borders we might be hard put to it to defend ourselves against them on one side and Brocas on the other.'

'The Hawks, Wildcats and Turtles listen when Valerian speaks, and he has even visited the towns of the Wolf Picts and come away alive.'

If that were true that were strange indeed, for all men knew the ferocity of the great confederacy of allied clans known as the Wolf tribe which dwelt in the west beyond the hunting grounds of the three lesser tribes he had named. Mostly they held aloof from the frontier, but the threat of their hatred was ever a menace along the borders of Schohira.

Hakon looked up as a tall man in trunk-hose, boots and scarlet cloak entered the taproom.

'There is Lord Valerian now,' he said.

I stared, started and was on my feet instantly.

'That man?' I ejaculated. 'I saw that man last night beyond the border, in a camp of the Hawks, watching the Dance of the Changing Snake!'

Valerian heard me and he whirled, going pale. His eyes blazed like those of a panther.

Hakon sprang up too.

'What are you saying?' he cried. 'Lord Valerian gave his pledge-'

'I care not!' I exclaimed fiercely, striding forward to confront the tall noble. 'I saw him where I lay hidden among the tamarack. I could not mistake that hawk-like face. I tell you he was there, naked and painted like a Pict-'

'You lie, damn you!' cried Valerian, and whipping aside his cloak he caught at the hilt of his sword. But before he could draw it I closed with him and bore him to the floor, where he caught at my throat with both hands, blaspheming like a madman. Then there was a swift stamp of feet, and men were dragging us apart, grasping my lord firmly, who stood white and panting with fury, still clutching my neckcloth which had been torn away from my throat in the struggle.

'Loose me, you dogs!' he raved. 'Take your peasant hands from me! I'll cleave this liar to the chin-'

'Here is no lie,' I said more calmly. 'I lay in the tamarack last night and watched while old Teyanoga dragged a Raven chief's soul from his body and forced it into that of a tree-serpent. It was my arrow which struck down the shaman. And I saw you there - you, a white man, naked and painted, accepted as one of the clan.'

'If this be true-' began Hakon.

'It is true, and there is your proof!' I exclaimed. 'Look there! On his bosom!'

His doublet and shirt had been torn open in the scuffle, and there, dim on his naked breast, showed the outline of the white skull which the Picts paint only when they mean war against the whites. He had sought to wash it off his skin, but Pictish paint stains strongly.

'Disarm him,' said Hakon, white to the lips.

'Give me my neckcloth,' I demanded, but his lordship spat at me, and thrust the cloth inside his shirt.

'When it is returned to you it shall be knotted in a hangman's noose about your rebel neck,' he snarled.

Hakon seemed undecided.

'Let us take him to the fort,' I said. 'Give him in custody of the commander. It was for no good purpose he took part in the Dance of the Snake. Those Picts were

painted for battle. That symbol on his breast means he intended to take part in the war for which they danced.'

'But great Mitra, this is incredible!' exclaimed Hakon. 'A white man, loosing those painted devils on his friends and neighbors?'

My lord said naught. He stood there between the men who grasped his arms, livid, his thin lips drawn back in a snarl that bared his teeth, but all hell burned like yellow fire in his eyes where I seemed to sense lights of madness.

But Hakon was uncertain. He dared not release Valerian, and he feared what the effect might be on the people if they saw the lord being led a captive to the fort.

'They will demand the reason,' he argued, 'and when they learn he has been dealing with the Picts in their war-paint, a panic might well ensue. Let us lock him into the gaol until we can bring Dirk here to question him.'

'It is dangerous to compromise with a situation like this,' I answered bluntly. 'But it is for you to decide. You are in command here.'

So we took his lordship out the back door, secretly, and it being dusk by that time, reached the gaol without being noticed by the people, who indeed stayed indoors mostly. The gaol was a small affair of logs, somewhat apart from the town, with four cells, and one only occupied, that by a fat rogue who had been imprisoned overnight for drunkenness and fighting in the street. He stared to see our prisoner. Not a word said Lord Valerian as Hakon locked the grilled door upon him, and detailed one of the men to stand guard. But a demon fire burned in his dark eyes as if behind the mask of his pale face he were laughing at us with fiendish triumph.

'You place only one man on guard?' I asked Hakon.

'Why more?' said he. 'Valerian cannot break out, and there is no one to rescue him.'

It seemed to me that Hakon was prone to take too much for granted, but after all, it was none of my affair, so I said no more.

Then Hakon and I went to the fort, and there I talked with Dirk Strom's son, the commander, who was in command of the town, in the absence of Jon Storm's son, the governor appointed by Lord Thasperas, who was now in command of the militiaarmy which lay at Thenitea. He looked sober indeed when he heard my tale, and said he would come to the gaol and question Lord Valerian as soon as his duties permitted, though he had little belief that my lord would talk, for he came of

a stubborn and haughty breed. He was glad to hear of the men Thandara offered him, and told me that he could find a man to return to Thandara accepting the offer, if I wished to remain in Schohira awhile, which I did. Then I returned to the tavern with Hakon, for it was our purpose to sleep there that night, and set out for Thenitea in the morning. Scouts kept the Schohirans posted on the movements of Brocas, and Hakon, who had been in their camp that day, said Brocas showed no signs of moving against us, which made me believe that he was waiting for Valerian to lead his Picts against the border. But Hakon still doubted, in spite of all I had told him, believing Valerian had but visited the Picts through friendliness as he often did. But I pointed out that no white man, however friendly to the Picts, was ever allowed to witness such a ceremony as the Dance of the Snake; he would have to be a blood-member of the clan.

3

I awakened suddenly and sat up in bed. My window was open, both shutters and pane, for coolness, for it was an upstairs room, and there was no tree near by which a thief might gain access. But some noise had awakened me, and now as I stared at the window, I saw the star-lit sky blotted out by a bulky, misshapen figure. I swung my legs around off the bed, demanding to know who it was, and groping for my hatchet, but the thing was on me with frightful speed and before I could even rise something was around my neck, choking and strangling me. Thrust almost against my face there was a dim frightful visage, but all I could make out in the darkness was a pair of flaming red eyes, and a peaked head. My nostrils were filled with a bestial reek.

I caught one of the thing's wrists and it was hairy as an ape's, and thick with iron muscles. But then I had found the haft of my hatchet and I lifted it and split that misshapen skull with one blow. It fell clear of me and I sprang up, gagging and gasping, and quivering in every limb. I found flint, steel and tinder, and struck a light and lit a candle, and glared wildly at the creature lying on the floor.

In form it was like a man, gnarled and misshapen, covered with thick hair. Its nails were long and black, like the talons of a beast, and its chinless, low-browed head was like that of an ape. The thing was a Chakan, one of those semi-human beings which dwell deep in the forests.

There came a knocking on my door and Hakon's voice called to know what the trouble was, so I bade him enter. He rushed in, ax in hand, his eyes widened at the sight of the thing on the floor.

'A Chakan!' he whispered. 'I have seen them, far to the west, smelling out trails

through the forests - the damned bloodhounds! What is that in his fingers?'

A chill of horror crept along my spine as I saw the creature still clutched a neckcloth in his fingers - the cloth which he had tried to knot like a hangman's noose about my neck.

'I have heard that Pictish shamans catch these creatures and tame them and use them to smell out their enemies,' he said slowly. 'But how could Lord Valerian so use one?'

'I know not,' I answered. 'But that neck cloth was given to the beast, and according to its nature it smelled my trail out and sought to break my neck. Let us go to the gaol, and quickly.'

Hakon roused his rangers and we hurried there, and found the guard lying before the open door of Valerian's empty cell with his throat cut. Hakon stood like one turned to stone, and then a faint call made us turn and we saw the white face of the drunkard peering at us from the next cell.

'He's gone,' quoth he; 'Lord Valerian's gone. Hark'ee; an hour ago while I lay on my bunk, I was awakened by a sound outside, and saw a strange dark woman come out of the shadows and walk up to the guard. He lifted his bow and bade her halt, but she laughed at him, staring into his eyes and he became as one in a trance. He stood staring stupidly - and Mitra, he took his own knife from his girdle and cut his throat, and he fell down and died. Then she took the keys from his belt and opened the door, and Valerian came out, and laughed like a devil out of hell, and kissed the wench, and she laughed with him. And she was not alone, for something lurked in the shadows behind her - some vague, monstrous being that never came into the light of the lanthorn hanging over the door.

'I heard her say best to kill the fat drunkard in the next cell, and by Mitra I was so nigh dead of fright I knew not if I were even alive. But Valerian said I was dead drunk, and I could have kissed him for that word. So they went away and as they went he said he would send her companion on a mission, and then they would go to a cabin on Lynx Creek, and there meet his retainers who had been hiding in the forest ever since he sent them from Valerian Hall. He said that Teyanoga would come to them there and they would cross the border and go among the Picts, and bring them back to cut all our throats.'

Hakon looked livid in the lanthorn light.

'Who is this woman?' I asked curiously.

'His half-breed Pictish mistress,' he said. 'Half Hawk-Pict and half-Ligurean. I have

heard of her. They call her the witch of Skandaga. I have never seen her, never before credited the tales whispered of her and Lord Valerian. But it is the truth.'

'I thought I had slain old Teyanoga,' I muttered. 'The old fiend must bear a charmed life - I saw my shaft quivering in his breast. What now?'

'We must go to the but on Lynx Creek and slay them all,' said Hakon. 'If they loose the Picts on the border hell will be to pay. We can spare no men from the fort or the town. We are enough. I know not how many men there will be on Lynx Creek, and I do not care. We will take them by surprise.'

We set out at once through the starlight. The land lay silent, lights twinkling dimly in the houses. To the westward loomed the black forest, silent, primordial, a brooding threat to the people who dared it.

We went in single file, bows strung and held in our left hands, hatchets swinging in our right hands. Our moccasins made no sound in the dew-wet grass. We melted into the woods and struck a trail that wound among oaks and alders. Here we strung out with some fifteen feet between each man, Hakon leading, and presently we dipped down into a grassy hollow and saw light streaming faintly from the cracks of shutters that covered a cabin's windows.

Hakon halted us and whispered for the men to wait, while we crept forward and spied upon them. We stole forward and surprised the sentry - a Schohiran renegade, who must have heard our stealthy approach but for the wine which staled his breath. I shall never forget the fierce hiss of satisfaction that breathed between Hakon's clenched teeth as he drove his knife into the villain's heart. We left the body hidden in the tall rank grass and stole up to the very wall of the cabin and dared to peer in at a crack. There was Valerian, with his fierce eyes blazing, and a dark, wildly beautiful girl in doeskin loin-clout and beaded moccasins, and her blackly burnished hair bound back by a gold band, curiously wrought. And there were half a dozen Schohiran renegades, sullen rogues in the woolen breeches and jerkins of farmers, with cutlasses at their belts, three forest-runners in buckskins, wild-looking men, and half a dozen Gundermen guards, compactly-built men with yellow hair cut square and confined under steel caps, corselets of chain mail, and polished leg-pieces. They were girt with swords and daggers - yellow-haired men with fair complexions and steely eyes and an accent differing greatly from the natives of the Westermarck. They were sturdy fighters, ruthless and well-disciplined, and very popular as guardsmen among the landowners of the frontier.

Listening there we heard them all laughing and conversing, Valerian boastful of his escape and swearing that he had sent a visitor to that cursed Thandaran that should do his proper business for him; the renegades sullen and full of oaths and

curses for their former friends; the forest-runners silent and attentive; the Gundermen careless and jovial, which joviality thinly masked their utterly ruthless natures. And the half-breed girl, whom they called Kwarada, laughed, and plagued Valerian, who seemed grimly amused. And Hakon trembled with fury as we listened to him boasting how he meant to rouse the Picts and lead them across the border to smite the Schohirans in the back while Brocas attacked from Coyaga.

Then we heard a light patter of feet and hugged the wall close, and saw the door open, and seven painted Picts entered, horrific figures in paint and feathers. They were led by old Teyanoga, whose breast-muscles were bandaged, whereby I knew my shaft had but fleshed itself in those heavy muscles. And wondered if the old demon were really a werewolf which could not be killed by mortal weapons as he boasted and many believed.

We lay close there, Hakon and I, and heard Teyanoga say that the Hawks, Wildcats and Turtles dared not strike across the border unless an alliance with the powerful Wolfmen could be struck up, for they feared that the Wolves might ravage their country while they fought the Schohirans. Teyanoga said that the three lesser tribes met the Wolves on the edge of Ghost Swamp for a council; and that the Wolves would abide by the counsel of the Wizard of the Swamp.

So Valerian said they would go to the Ghost Swamp and see if they could not persuade the Wizard to induce the 'Wolves to join the others. At that Hakon told me to crawl back and get the others, and I saw- it was in his mind that we should attack, outnumbered as we were, but so fired was I by the infamous plot to which we had listened that I was as eager as he. I stole back and brought the others, and as soon as he heard us coming, he sprang up and ran at the door to beat it in with his war-ax.

At the same instant others of us burst in the shutters and poured arrows into the room, striking down some and set the cabin on fire.

They were thrown into confusion, and made no attempt to hold the cabin. The candles were upset and went out, but the fire lent a dim glow. They rushed the door and some were slain then, and others as we grappled with them. But presently all fled into the woods except those we slew, Gundermen, renegades and painted Picts, but Valerian and the girl were still in the cabin. Then they came forth and she laughed and hurled something on the ground that burst and blinded us with a foul smoke, through which they escaped.

All but four of our men had been slain in the desperate fighting, but we started instantly in pursuit, sending back one of the wounded men to warn the town.

The trail led into the wilderness.

We followed, and in fights and skirmishes slew several others, and presently all our men were slain except Hakon and I. We trailed Valerian across the border and into a camp of the wartribes near Ghost Swamp, where the chiefs were going to consult the Wizard, a pre-Pictish shaman.

We trailed Valerian into the swamp, he going secretly to give the shamans instructions, and Hakon waited on the trail to slay Valerian while I stole into the swamp to slay the Wizard. But both of us were captured by the Wizard, who gave his consent to the war and gave them a ghastly magic to use against the white men, and the tribes went howling toward the border. But Hakon and I escaped and slew the Wizard and followed, in time to turn their magic against them, and rout them.