

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

The Master of the Crabs

BY CLARK ASHTON SMITH



Strange books, they were, containing the erudition of buried aeons



Heading by LEE PROWN COYE

I REMEMBER that I grumbled a little when Mior Lumivix awakened me. The past evening had been a tedious one with its unpleasant familiar vigil, during which I had nodded often. From sunfall till

the setting of Scorpio, which occurred well after midnight at that season, it had been my duty to tend the gradual inspissation of a decoction of scarabs, much favored by Mior Lumivix in the compound of his most re-

quested love-potions. He had warned me often that this liquor must be thickened neither too slowly nor too rapidly, by maintaining an even fire in the athanor, and had cursed me more than once for spoiling it. Therefore, I did not yield to my drowsiness till the decoction was safely decanted and strained thrice through the sieve of perforated shark-skin.

Taciturn beyond his wont, the Master had retired early to his chamber. I knew that something troubled him; but was too tired for overmuch conjecture, and had not dared to question him.

It seemed that I had not slept for more than the period of a few pulsebeats—and here was the Master thrusting the yellow-slotted eye of his lantern into my face and dragging me from the pallet. I knew that I should not sleep again that night: for the Master wore his one-horned hat, and his cloak was girdled tightly about him, with the ancient arthame depending from the girdle in its shagreen sheath that time and the hands of many magicians had blackened.

"Abortion fathered by a sloth!" he cried. "Suckling of a sow that has eaten mandragora! Would you slumber till doomsday? We must hurry: I have learned that Sarcand has procured the chart of Omvor and has gone forth alone to the wharves. No doubt he means to embark in quest of the temple-treasure. We must follow quickly for much time has already been lost."

I rose now without further demur and dressed myself expeditiously, knowing well the urgency of this matter. Sarcand, who had but lately come to the city of Mirouane, had already made himself the most formidable of all my master's competitors. It was said that he was native to Naat, amid the sombre western ocean, having been begotten by a sorcerer of that isle on a woman of the black cannibals who dwell beyond its middle mountains. He combined his mother's savage nature with the dark necromantic craft of his father; and, moreover, had acquired much dubious knowledge and repute in his travels through orient kingdoms before settling in Mirouane.

The fabulous chart of Omvor, dating from lost ages, was a thing that many generations of wizards had dreamt to find. Omvor, an ancient pirate still renowned, had per-

formed successfully a feat of impious rashness. Sailing up a closely guarded estuary by night with his small crew disguised as priests in stolen temple-barges, he had looted the fane of the Moon-God in Faraad and had carried away many of its virgins, together with gems, gold, altar-vessels, talismans, phylacteries and books of eldritch elder magic. These books were the gravest loss of all, since even the priests had never dared to copy them. They were unique and irreplaceable, containing the erudition of buried aeons.

Omvor's feat had given rise to many legends. He and his crew and the ravished virgins, in two small brigantines, had vanished ultimately amid the western seas. It was believed that they had been caught by the Black River, that terrible ocean-stream which pours with an irresistible swiftening beyond Naat to the world's end. But before that final voyage, Omvor had lightened his vessels of the looted treasure and had made a chart on which the location of its hiding-place was indicated. This chart he had given to a former comrade who had grown too old for voyaging.

No man had ever found the treasure. But it was said that the chart still existed throughout the centuries, hidden somewhere no less securely than the loot of the Moon-God's temple. Of late there were rumors that some sailor, inheriting it from his fathers, had brought the map to Mirouane. Mior Lumivix, through agents both human and preterhuman, had tried vainly to trace the sailor; knowing that Sarcand and the other wizards of the city were also seeking him.

THIS much was known to me; and the Master told me more while, at his bidding, I collected hastily such provisions as were needed for a voyage of several days.

"I had watched Sarcand like an osprey watching its nest," he said. "My familiars found me that he had found the chart's owner, and had hired some thief to steal it; but they could tell me little else. Even the eyes of my devil-cat, peering through his windows, were baffled by the cuttle-fish darkness with which his magic surrounds him at will.

"Tonight I did a dangerous thing, since

there was no other way. Drinking the juice of the purple *dedaim*, which induces profound trance, I projected my ka into his elemental-guarded chamber. The elementals knew my presence, they gathered about me in shapes of fire and shadow, menacing me unspeakably. They opposed me, they drove me forth . . . but I had seen—enough.”

The Master paused, bidding me gird myself with a consecrated magic sword, similar to his own but of less antiquity, which he had never before allowed me to wear. By this time I had gathered together the required provision of food and drink, storing it in a strong fish-net that I could carry easily over my shoulder by the handle. The net was one that was used mainly for catching certain sea-reptiles, from which Mior Lumivix extracted a venom possessing unique virtue.

It was not till we had locked all the portals, and had plunged into the dark seaward-winding streets, that the Master resumed his account:

“A man was leaving Sarcand’s chamber at the moment of my entrance. I saw him briefly, ere the black arras parted and closed; but I shall know him again. He was young and plump, with powerful sinews under the plumpness, with slanted squinting eyes in a girlish face and the swart yellow skin of a man from the southern isles. He wore the short breeks and ankle-topping boots of a mariner, being otherwise naked.

“Sarcand was sitting with his back half-turned, holding an unrolled sheet of papyrus, yellow as the sailor’s face, to that evil, four-horned lamp which he feeds with cobras’ oil. The lamp glared like a ghoulish eye. But I looked over his shoulder . . . long enough . . . before his demons could hurry me from the room. The papyrus was indeed the chart of Omvor. It was stiff with age, and stained with blood and sea-water. But its title and purpose and appellations were still legible, though inscribed in an archaic script that few can read nowadays.

“It showed the western shore of the continent Zothique, and the seas beyond. An isle lying due westward from Mirouane was indicated as the burial-place of the treasure. It was named the Island of Crabs on the chart: but plainly it is none other than the one now called Iribos which, though seldom

visited, lies at a distance of only two days’ voyaging. There are no other islands within a hundred leagues, either north or south, excepting a few desolate rocks and small atolls.”

Urging me to greater haste, Mior Lumivix continued:

“I woke too tardily from the swoon by the *dedaim*. A lesser adept would never have awakened at all.

“My familiars warned me that Sarcand had left his house a full hour ago. He was prepared for a journey, and went wharfward. But we will overtake him. I think that he will go without companions to Iribos, desiring to keep the treasure wholly secret. He is indeed strong and terrible, but his demons are of a kind that cannot cross water, being entirely earthbound. He has left them behind with the moiety of his magic. Have no fear for the outcome.”

THE wharves were still and almost deserted, except for a few sleeping sailors who had succumbed to the rank wine and arrack of the taverns. Under the late moon, that had curved and sharpened to a slim simitar, we unmoored our boat and pushed away, the Master holding the tiller, while I bent my shoulders to the broad-bladed oars. Thus we threaded the huddled maze of fargathered ships, of xebecs and galleys, of river-barges and scows and feluccas, that thronged that immemorial harbor. The sluggish air, hardly stirring our tall lateen sail, was pregnant with sea-smells, with the reek of laden fishing-boats and the spices of exotic cargoes. None hailed us; and we heard only the calling of watchmen on shadowy decks, proclaiming the hour in outlandish tongues.

Our boat, though small and open, was stoutly built of orient beef-wood. Sharply prowed and deeply keeled, with high bulwarks, it had proven itself seaworthy even in tempests such as were not to be apprehended at this season.

Blowing over Mirouane, from fields and orchards and desert kingdoms, a wind freshened behind us as we cleared the harbor. It stiffened, till the sail bellied like a dragon’s wing. The furrows of foam curved high beside our sharp prow, as we followed Capricornus down the west.

Far out on the waters before us, in the dim moonlight, something seemed to move, to dance and waver like a phantom. Perhaps it was Sarcand's boat . . . or another's. Doubtless, the Master also saw it; but he said only:

"You may sleep now."

So I, Manthar the apprentice, composed myself to slumber, while Mior Lumivix steered on, and the starry hooves and horns of the Goat sank seaward.

The sun was high above our stern when I awakened. The wind still blew, strong and favorable, driving us into the west with unabated speed. We had passed beyond sight of the shore-line of Zothique. The sky was void of clouds, the sea vacant of any sail, unrolling before us like a vast scroll of sombre azure, lined only with the shifting and fading foam-crests.

The day went by, ebbing beyond the still-empty horizon; and night overtook us like the heaven-blotting purple sail of a god, sewn with the Signs and planets. The night too went over, and a second dawn.

All this time, without sleeping, the Master had steered the boat, with eyes peering implacably westward like those of an ocean-hawk; and I wondered greatly at his endurance. Now for awhile he slept, sitting upright at the helm. But it seemed that his eyes were still vigilant behind their lids; and his hand still held the rudder straight, without slackening.

In a few hours the Master opened his eyes; but hardly stirred from the posture he maintained throughout.

He had spoken little during our voyage. I did not question him, knowing that he would tell me whatever was needful at the due time. But I was full of curiosities; and was not without fear and doubt regarding Sarcand, whose rumored necromancies might well have dismayed others than a mere novice. I could surmise nothing of the Master's thoughts, except that they concerned dark and esoteric matters.

Having slept for the third time since our embarkment, I was roused by the Master crying loudly. In the dimness of the third dawn, an island towered before us, impending with jagged cliffs and jutting crags, and barring the sea for several leagues to northward and southward. It was shaped some-

what like a monster, facing north. Its head was a high-horned promontory, dipping a great griffin-like beak in the ocean.

"This is Iribos," the Master told me. "The sea is strong about it, with strange tides and perilous currents. There are no landing places on this side, and we must not venture too close. We must round the northern headland. There is a small cove amid the western cliffs, entered only through a sea-cavern. It is there that the treasure lies."

WE TACKED northward slowly and deliberately against the wind, at a distance of three or four bow-shots from the island. All our sea-craft was required to make progress: for the wind strengthened wildly, as if swollen by the breath of devils. Above its howling we heard the surf's clamor upon those monstrous rocks that rose bare and gaunt from cerements of foam.

"The isle is unpeopled," said Mior Lumivix. "It is shunned by sailors and even by the sea-fowl. Men say that the curse of the maritime gods was laid upon it long ago, forbidding it to any but the creatures of the submarine deep. Its coves and caverns are haunted by crabs and octopi . . . and perhaps by stranger things."

We sailed on in a tedious serpentine course, beaten back at times or born perilously shoreward by the shifting gusts that opposed us like evil demons. The sun climbed in the orient, shining starkly down on the desolation of crags and scarps that was Iribos. Still we tacked and veered; and I seemed to sense the beginning of a strange unease in the Master. But of this, if such there was, his manner betrayed no sign.

It was almost noon when we rounded at last the long beak of the northern promontory. There, when we turned southerly, the wind fell in a weird stillness, and the sea was miraculously calmed as if by wizard oils. Our sail hung limp and useless above mirror-like waters, in which it seemed that the boats' reflected image and ours, unbroken, moveless, might float forever amid the unchanging reflection of the monster-shaped isle. We both began to ply the oars; but even thus the boat crawled with a singular slowness.

I observed the isle strictly as we passed along, noting several inlets where, to all ap-

pearance, a vessel could have landed readily.

"There is much danger here," said Mior Lumivix, without elucidating his statement.

Again, as we continued, the cliffs became a wall that was broken only by rifts and chasms. They were crowned in places by a sparse, funereal-colored vegetation that hardly served to soften their formidable aspect. High up in the clefted rocks, where it seemed that no natural tide or tempest could have flung them, I observed the scattered spars and timbers of antique vessels.

"Row closer," enjoined the Master. "We are nearing the cavern that leads to the hidden inlet."

Even as we veered landward through the crystalline calm, there was a sudden seething and ruffling about us, as if some monster had risen beneath. The boat began to shoot with plummet-like speed toward the cliffs, the sea foaming and streaming all around as though some kraken were dragging us to its caverned lair. Borne like a leaf on a cataract, we toiled vainly with straining oars against the ineluctable current.

Heaving higher momentarily, the cliffs seemed to shear the heavens above us, unscalable, without ledge or foothold. Then, in the sheer wall, appeared the low, broad arch of a cavern-mouth that we had not discerned heretofore, toward which the boat was drawn with dreadful swiftness.

"It is the entrance!" cried the Master. "But some wizard tide has flooded it."

We shipped our useless oars and crouched down behind the thwarts as we neared the opening: for it seemed that the lowness of the arch would afford bare passage to our high-built prow. There was no time to unstep the mast, which broke instantly like a reed as we raced on without slackening into blind torrential darkness.

Half-stunned, and striving to extricate myself from the fallen, spar-weighted sail, I felt the chillness of water splashing about me and knew that the boat was filling and sinking. A moment more, and the water was in my ears and eyes and nostrils: but even as I sank and drowned there was still the sense of swift onward motion. Then it seemed dimly that arms were around me in the strangling darkness; and I rose suddenly, choking and gasping and spewing, into sunlight.

WHEN I had rid my lungs of the brine and regained my senses more fully, I found that Mior Lumivix and I were floating in a small haven, shaped like a half-moon, and surrounded by crags and pinnacles of sullen-colored rock. Close by, in a sheer, straight wall, was the inner mouth of the cavern through which the mysterious current had carried us, with faint ripples spreading around it and fading away into water smooth and green as a platter of jade. Opposite, on the haven's farther side, was the long curve of a shelving beach strewn with boulders and driftwood. A boat resembling ours, with an unshipped mast and a furled sail the color of fresh blood, was moored to the beach. Near it, from the shoaling water, protruded the broken-off mast of another boat, whose sunken outlines we discerned obscurely. Two objects which we took for human figures were lying half in and half out of the shallows a little farther along the strand. At that distance we could hardly know whether they were living men or cadavers. Their contours were half-hidden by what seemed a curious sort of brownish-yellow drapery that trailed away amid the rocks, appearing to move and shift and waver incessantly.

"There is mystery here," said Mior Lumivix in a low voice. "We must proceed with care and circumspection."

We swam ashore at the near end of the beach, where it narrowed like the tip of a crescent moon to meet the sea-wall. Taking his arthame from its sheath the Master wiped it dry with the hem of his cloak, bidding me do likewise with my own weapons lest the brine corrode it. Then, hiding the wizard blades beneath our raiment, we followed the broadening beach toward the moored boat and the two reclining figures.

"This is indeed the place of Omvor's chart," observed the Master. "The boat with the blood-red sail belongs to Sarcand. No doubt he has found the cave, which lies hidden somewhere among the rocks. But who are these others? I do not think that they came with Sarcand."

As we neared the figures, the appearance of a yellowish-brown drapery that covered them resolved itself in its true nature. It consisted of a great number of crabs who were crawling over their half-submerged

bodies and running to and fro behind a heap of immense boulders.

We went forward and stooped over the bodies, from which the crabs were busily detaching morsels of bloody flesh. One of the bodies lay on its face; the other stared with half-eaten features at the sun. Their skin, or what remained of it, was a swarthy yellow. Both were clad in short purple breeks and sailor's boots, being otherwise naked.

"What hellishness is this?" inquired the Master. "These men are but newly dead—and already the crabs rend them. Such creatures are wont to wait for the softening of decomposition. And look—they do not even devour the morsels they have torn, but bear them away."

This indeed was true, for I saw now that a constant procession of crabs departed from the bodies, each carrying a shred of flesh, to vanish beyond the rocks; while another procession came, or perhaps returned, with empty pincers.

"I think," said Mior Lumivix, "that the man with the upturned face is the sailor that I saw leaving Sarcand's room; the thief who had stolen the chart for Sarcand from its owner."

IN MY horror and disgust I had picked up a fragment of rock and was about to crush some of the hideously laden crabs as they crawled away from the corpses.

"Nay," the Master stayed me, "let us follow them."

Rounding the great heap of boulders, we saw that the twofold procession entered, and emerged from, the mouth of a cavern that had heretofore been hidden from view.

With hands tightening on the hilts of our arthames, we went cautiously and circumspectly toward the cavern and paused a little short of its entrance. From this vantage, however, nothing was visible within except the lines of crawling crabs.

"Enter!" cried a sonorous voice that seemed to prolong and repeat the word in far-receding reverberations, like the voice of a ghou! echoing in some profound sepulchral vault.

The voice was that of the sorcerer Sarcand. The Master looked at me, with whole volumes of warning in his narrowed eyes and we entered the cavern.

THE place was high-domed and of indefinite extent. Light was afforded by a great rift in the vault above, through which, at this hour, the direct rays of the sun slanted in, falling goldenly on the cavern's foreground and tipping with light the great fangs of stalactites and stalagmites in the gloom beyond. At one side was a pool of water, fed by a thin rill from a spring that dripped somewhere in the darkness.

With the shafted splendor shining full upon him, Sarcand reposed half-sitting, half-recumbent, with his back against an open chest of age-darkened bronze. His huge ebon-black body, powerfully muscled though inclining toward corpulence, was nude except for a necklace of rubies, each the size of a plover's egg, that depended about his throat. His crimson sarong, strangely tattered, bared his legs as they lay outstretched amid the cavern's rubble. The right leg had manifestly been broken somewhere below the knee, for it was rudely bound with splints of driftwood and strips torn from the sarong.

Sarcand's cloak of lazuli-colored silk was outspread beside him. It was strewn with graven gems and amulets, with gold coins and jewel-crusted altar-vessels, that flashed and glittered amid volumens of parchment and papyrus. A book with black metal covers lay open as if newly put aside, showing illuminations drawn in fiery ancient inks.

Beside the book, within reach of Sarcand's fingers, was a mound of raw and bloody shreds. Over the cloak, over the coins and scrolls and jewels, crawled the incoming line of crabs, each of which added its torn-off morsel to the mound and then crept on to join the outgoing column.

I could well believe the tales regarding Sarcand's ancestry. Indeed, it seemed that he favored his mother entirely: for his hair and features as well as his skin were those of the Negro cannibals of Naat as I had seen them depicted in travelers' drawings. He fronted us inscrutably, his arms crossed on his bosom. I noticed a great emerald shining darkly on the index finger of his right hand.

"I knew that you would follow me," he said, "even as I knew that the thief and his companion would follow. All of you have thought to slay me and take the treasure. It is true that I have suffered an iniurv: a fra-

ment of loosened rock fell from the cavern-roof, breaking my leg as I bent over to inspect the treasures in the opened chest. I must lie here till the bone has knit. In the meanwhile I am well armed . . . and well served and guarded."

"We came to take the treasure," replied Mior Lumivix directly. "I had thought to slay you, but only in fair combat, man to man and wizard to wizard, with none but my neophyte Manthar and the rocks of Iribos for witness."

"Aye, and your neophyte is also armed with an arthame. However, it matters little. I shall feast on your liver, Mior Lumivix, and wax stronger by such power of sorcery as was yours."

This the Master appeared to disregard.

"What foulness have you conjured now?" he inquired sharply, pointing to the crabs who were still depositing their morsels on the grisly mound.

Sarcand held aloft the hand on whose index finger gleamed the immense emerald, set, as we now perceived, in a ring that was wrought with the tentacles of a kraken clasping the orb-like gem.

"I found this ring amid the treasure," he boasted. "It was closed in a cylinder of unknown metal, together with a scroll that informed me of the ring's uses and its mighty magic. It is the signet-ring of Basatan, the sea-god. He who looks long and deeply into the emerald may behold distant scenes and happenings at will. He who wears the ring can exert control over the winds and currents of the sea and over the sea's creatures, by describing certain signs in air with his finger."

WHILE Sarcand spoke it seemed that the green jewel brightened and darkened and deepened strangely, like a tiny window with all the sea's mystery and immensity lying beyond. Enthralled and entranced, I forgot the circumstances of our situation: for the jewel swelled upon my vision, blotting from view the black fingers of Sarcand, with a swirling as of tides and of shadowy fins and tentacles far down in its glimmering greenness.

"Beware, Manthar," the Master murmured in my ear. "We face a dreadful magic, and must retain the command of all

our faculties. Avert your eyes from the emerald."

I obeyed the dimly heard whisper. The vision dwindled away, vanishing swiftly, and the form and features of Sarcand returned. His lubber lips were curved in a broad sardonic grin, showing his strong white teeth that were pointed like those of a shark. He dropped the huge hand that wore the signet of Basatan, plunging it into the chest behind him and bringing it forth filled with many-tinted gems, with pearls, opals, sapphires, bloodstones, diamonds, chatoyants. These he let dribble in a flashing rill from his fingers, as he resumed his peroration:

"I preceded you to Iribos by many hours. It was known to me that the outer cavern could be entered safely only at low tide, with an unstepped mast.

"Perhaps you have already inferred whatever else I might tell you. At any rate the knowledge will perish with you very shortly.

"After learning the uses of the ring I was able to watch the seas around Iribos in the jewel. Lying here with my shattered leg, I saw the approach of the thief and his fellow, I called up the sea-current by which their boat was drawn into the flooded cavern, sinking swiftly. They would have swum ashore: but at my command the crabs in the haven drew them under and drowned them; letting the tide beach their corpses later. . . . That cursed thief! I had paid him well for the stolen chart, which he was too ignorant to read, suspecting only that it concerned a treasure-trove. . . .

"Still later I trapped you in the same fashion, after delaying you awhile with contrary winds and an adverse calm, I have preserved you, however, for another doom than drowning."

The voice of the necromancer sank away in profound echoes, leaving a silence fraught with insufferable suspense. It seemed that we stood amid the gaping of undiscovered gulfs, in a place of awful darkness, lit only by the eyes of Sarcand and the ring's talismanic jewel.

The spell that had fallen upon me was broken by the cold ironic tones of the Master:

"Sarcand, there is another sorcery that you have not mentioned."

Sarcand's laughter was like the sound of a mounting surf. "I follow the custom of my mother's people; and the crabs serve me with that which I require, summoned and constrained by the sea-god's ring."

SO SAYING, he raised his hand and described a peculiar sign with the index finger, on which the ring flashed like a circling orb. The double column of crabs suspended their crawling for a moment. Then, moved as if by a single impulse, they began to scuttle toward us, while others appeared from the cavern's entrance and from its inner recesses to swell their rapidly growing numbers. They surged upon us with a speed beyond belief, assailing our ankles and shins with their knife-sharp pincers as if animated by demons. I stooped over, striking and thrusting with my arthame; but the few that I crushed in this manner were replaced by scores; while others, catching the hem of my cloak, began to climb it from behind and weigh it down. Thus encumbered, I lost my footing on the slippery ground and fell backward amid the scuttling multitude.

Lying there while the crabs poured over me like a seething wave, I saw the Master shed his burdened cloak and cast it aside. Then, while the spell-drawn army still besieged him, climbing upon each other's backs and scaling his very knees and thighs, he hurled his arthame with a strange circular motion at the upraised arm of Sarcand. Straightly the blade flew, revolving like a disk of brightness; and the hand of the black necromancer was sundered cleanly at the wrist, and the ring flashed on its index finger like a falling star as it fell groundward.

Blood spouted in a fountain from the handless wrist, while Sarcand sat as in a

stupor, maintaining for a brief instant the gesture of his conjuration. Then his arm dropped to his side and the blood rilled out upon the littered cloak, spreading swiftly amid the gems and coins and volumens, and staining the mound of crab-deposited morsels. As if the arm's movement had been another signal, the crabs fell away from the Master and myself and swarmed in a long, innumerable tide toward Sarcand. They covered his legs, they climbed his great torso, they scrambled for place on his escalated shoulders. He tore them away with his one hand, roaring terrible curses and imprecations that rolled in countless echoes throughout the cavern. But the crabs still assailed him as if driven by some demoniac frenzy; and blood trickled forth more and more copiously from the small wounds they had made, to suffuse their pincers and streak their shells with broadening rillets of crimson.

It seemed that long hours went by while the Master and I stood watching. At last the prostrate thing that was Sarcand had ceased to heave and toss under the living shroud that enswathed it. Only the splint-bound leg and the lopped-off hand with the ring of Basatan remained untouched by the loathsome busy crabs.

"Faugh!" the Master exclaimed. "He left his devils behind when he came here; but he found others. . . . It is time that we went out for a walk in the sun. Manthar, my good lubberly apprentice, I would have you build a fire of driftwood on the beach. Pile on the fuel without sparing, to make a bed of coals deep and hot and red as the hearth of hell, in which to roast us a dozen crabs. But be careful to choose the ones that have come freshly from the sea."
