

the Cloud of Hate

By FRITZ LEIBER

*From the Hall of Hate the evil fog
snaked through Lankhmar,
carrying the fetid touch of death
to Faflhrd and the Mouser.*

MUFFLED drums beat out a nerve-scratching rhythm and red lights flickered hypnotically in the underground Temple of Hates, where five thousand ragged worshippers knelt and abased themselves and ecstatically pressed foreheads against the cold and gritty cobbles as the trance took hold and the human venom rose in them.

Lankhmar had been at peace for many moons and so the hates were greater. Tonight, furthermore, at a spot halfway across the city, Lankhmar's black-to-gaed nobility celebrated with merriment and feasting and twinkling dance the betrothal of their Overlord's daughter to the Prince of Ilthmar, and so the hates were redoubled.

The single-halled subterranean

temple was so long and wide and at the same time so irregularly planted with thick pillars that at no point could a person see more than a third of the way across it. Yet it had a ceiling so low that at any point a man standing tall could have brushed it with his fingertips—except that here all grovelled. The air was swooningly fetid. The dark bent backs of the hate-ensorceled worshippers made a kind of hummocky dark ground, from which the nitre-crust stone pillars rose like gray tree trunks.

The masked Archpriest of the Hates lifted a skinny finger. Parchment-thin iron cymbals began to clash in unison with the drums and the furnace-red flickerings, wringing to an unendurable pitch the malices and envies



of the blackly enraptured communicants.

Then in the gloom of that great slit-like hall, dim pale tendrils began to rise from the dark hummocky ground of the bent backs, as though a white, swift-growing ghost-grass had been seeded there. The tendrils, which in another world might have been described as ectoplasmic, quickly multiplied, thickened, lengthened, and then coalesced into questing white serpentine shapes, so that it seemed as if tongues of thick river-fog had come licking down into this sub-cellar from the broad-flowing river Hlal.

THE white serpents coiled past the pillars, brushed the low ceiling, moistly caressed the backs of their devotees and source, and then in turn coalesced to pour up the curving black hole of a narrow spiral stairway, the stone steps of which were worn almost to chutelike smoothness—a sinuously billowing white cylinder in which a redness lurked.

And all the while the drums and cymbals did not falter for a single beat, nor did the eyes of the Archpriest flicker once sideways in their wooden mask, nor did one mesmerized bent soul look up.

Along a misted alley overhead there was hurrying home to the

thieves' quarter a beggar girl, skinny-frail of limb and with eyes big as a lemur's peering fearfully from a tiny face of elfin beauty. She saw the white pillar, slug-flat now, pouring out between the bars of a window-slit level with the pavement, and although there were thick chilly tendrils of river-fog already following her, she knew that this was different.

She tried to run around the thing, but swift almost as a serpent striking, it whipped across to the opposite wall, barring her way. She ran back, but it outraced her and made a U, penning her against the unyielding wall. Then she only stood still and shook as the fog-serpent narrowed and grew denser and came wreathing around her. Its tip swayed like the head of a poisonous snake preparing to strike and then suddenly dipped toward her breast. She stopped shaking then and her head fell back and the pupils rolled up in her lemur-like eyes so that they showed only great whites, and she dropped to the pavement limp as a rag.

The fog-serpent nosed at her for a few moments, then as though irked at finding no life remaining, flipped her over on her face, and went swiftly questing in the same direction the river-fog itself was taking: across city toward the homes of

the nobles and the lantern-jeweled palace of the Overlord.

Save for an occasional fleeting red glint in the one, the two sorts of fog were identical.

BESIDE a dry stone horse-trough at the juncture of five alleys, two men curled close to either side of a squat brazier in which a little charcoal glowed. The spot was so near the quarter of the nobles that the sounds of music and laughter came at intervals, faintly, along with a dim rainbow-glow of light. The two men might have been a hulking beggar and a small one, except that their tunics and leggings and cloaks, though threadbare, were of good stuff, and scabbarded weapons lay close to the hand of each.

The larger said, "There'll be fog tonight. I smell it coming from the Hlal." This was Fafhrd, brawny-armed, pale and serene of face, reddish gold of hair.

For reply the smaller shivered and fed the brazier two small gobbets of charcoal and said sardonically, "Next predict glaciers!—advancing down the Street of the Gods, by preference." That was the Mouser, eyes wary, lips quirking, cheeks muffled by gray hood drawn close.

Fafhrd grinned. As a tinkling gust of distant song came by, he asked the dark air that carried it, "Now why aren't we warmly

cushioned somewhere inside tonight, well drunk and sweetly embraced?"

For answer the Gray Mouser drew from his belt a rat-skin pouch and slapped it by its drawstrings against his palm. It flattened as it hit and nothing chinked. For good measure he writhed at Fafhrd the backs of his ten fingers, all ringless.

Fafhrd grinned again and said to the dusky space around them, which was now filled with the finest mist, the fog's forerunner, "Now that's a strange thing. We've won I know not how many jewels and oddments of gold and electrum in our adventurings—and even letters of credit on the Guild of the Grain Merchants. Where have they all flown to?—the credit-letters on parchment wings, the jewels jetting fire like tiny red and green and pearly cuttlefish. Why aren't we rich?"

The Mouser snorted, "Because you dribble away our get on worthless drabs, or oftener still pour it out for some noble whim—some plot of bogus angels to storm the walls of Hell. Meantime I stay poor nursemaid-ing you."

Fafhrd laughed and retorted, "You overlook your own whimsical imprudences, such as slitting the Overlord's purse and picking his pocket too the selfsame night you rescued and returned him his lost crown. No, Mouser, I

think we're poor because—" Suddenly he lifted on an elbow and flared his nostrils as he snuffed the chill moist air. "There's a taint in the fog tonight," he announced.

The Mouser said dryly, "I already smell dead fish, burnt fat, horse dung, tickly lint, Lankhmar sausage gone stale, cheap temple incense burnt by the ten-pound cake, rancid oil, moldy grain, slaves' barracks, embalmers' tanks crowded to the black brim, and the stink of a cathedral full of unwashed carters and trulls celebrating orgiastic rites—and now you tell me of a taint!"

"It is something different from all those," Fafhrd said, peering successively down the five alleys. "Perhaps the last . . ." His voice trailed off doubtfully and he shrugged.

STRANDS of fog came questing through small high-set street-level windows into the tavern called the Rats' Nest, interlacing curiously with the soot-trail from a failing torch, but unnoticed except by an old harlot who pulled her patchy fur cloak closer at her throat.

All eyes were on the wrist game being played across an ancient oaken table by the famed bravo Gnarlag and a dark-skinned mercenary almost as big-thewed as he. Right elbows

firmly planted and right hands bone-squeezingly gripped, each strained to force the back of the other's wrist down against the ringed and scarred and carved and knife-stuck wood. Gnarlag, who scowled sneeringly, had the advantage by a thumb's length.

One of the fog-strands, as though itself a devotee of the wrist game and curious about the bout, drifted over Gnarlag's shoulder. To the old harlot the inquisitive fog-strand looked red-ly-veined—a reflection from the torches, no doubt, but she prayed it brought fresh blood to Gnarlag.

The fog finger touched the taut arm. Gnarlag's sneering look turned to one of pure hate and the muscles of his forearm seemed to double in thickness as he rotated it more than a half turn. There was a muffled snap and a gasp of anguish. The mercenary's wrist had been broken.

Gnarlag stood up. He knocked to the wall a wine cup offered him and cuffed aside a girl who would have embraced him. Then grabbing up his two swords on their thick belt from the bench beside him, he strode to the brick stairs and up out of the Rats' Nest. By some trick of air currents, perhaps, it seemed that a fog-strand rested across his shoulders like a comradely arm.

When he was gone, someone said, "Gnarlag was ever a cold

and ungrateful winner." The dark mercenary stared at his dangling hand and bit back groans.

SO TELL me, giant philosopher, why we're not dukes," the Gray Mouser demanded, unrolling a forefinger from the fist on his knee so that it pointed across the brazier at Fafhrd. "Or emperors, for that matter, or demigods."

"We are not dukes because we're no man's man," Fafhrd replied smugly, settling his shoulders against the stone horse-trough. "Even a duke must butter up a king, and demigods the gods. We butter no one. We go our own way, choosing our own adventures—and our own follies! Better freedom and a chilly road than a warm hearth and servitude."

"There speaks the hound turned out by his last master and not yet found new boots to slaver on," the Mouser retorted with comradely sardonic impudence. "Look you, you noble liar, we've labored for a dozen lords and kings and merchants fat. You've served Movarl across the Inner Sea. I've served the bandit Pulg. We've both served this Glipkerio, whose girl is tied to Ilthmar this same night."

"Those are all exceptions," Fafhrd protested grandly. "And even when we serve, we make the

rules. We bow to no man's ultimate command, dance to no wizard's drumming, join no mob, mark to no wildering hate-call. When we draw sword, it's for ourselves alone. *What's that?*"

He had lifted his sword for emphasis, gripping it by the scabbard just below the guard, but now he held it still with the hilt near his ear.

"It hums a warning!" he said tersely after a moment. "The steel twangs softly in its sheath!"

Chuckling tolerantly at this show of superstition, the Mouser drew his slimmer sword from its light scabbard, sighted along the blade's oiled length at the red embers, spotted a couple of dark flecks and began to rub at them with a rag.

When nothing more happened, Fafhrd said grudgingly as he laid down his undrawn sword, "Perchance only a dragon walked across the cave where the blade was forged. Still, I don't like this tainted mist."

GIS the cutthroat and the courtesan Tres had watched the fog coming across the fantastically peaked roofs of Lankhmar until it obscured the low-swinging yellow crescent of the moon and the rainbow glow from the palace. Then they had lit the cressets and drawn the blue drapes and were playing at

throw-knife to sharpen their appetites for a more intimate but hardly kinder game.

Tres was not unskillful, but Gis could somersault the weapon a dozen or thirteen times before it stuck in wood, and throw as truly between his legs as back over his shoulder without mirror. Whenever he threw the knife so it struck very near Tres, he smiled. She had to remind herself that he was not much more evil than most evil men.

A frond of fog came wreathing between the blue drapes and touched Gis on the temple as he prepared to throw. "The blood in the fog's in your eye-whites!" Tres cried, staring at him weirdly. He seized the girl by the ear and, smiling hugely, slashed her neck just below his knuckles. Then, dancing out of the way of the gushing blood, he delicately snatched up his belt of daggers and darted down the curving stairs to the street, where he plunged into a warm-hearted fog that was somehow as full of rage as the strong wine of Tovilyis is of sugar, a veritable cistern of wrath. His whole being was bathed in sensations as ecstatic as those strong but fleeting ones the tendril's touch on his temple had loosed from his brain. Visions of daggered princesses and skewered serving maids danced in his head. He stepped along happily, agog with delicious an-

ticipations, beside Gnarlag of the Two Swords, knowing him at once for a hate-brother, sacrosanct, another slave of the blessed fog.

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Fafhrd cupped his big hands over the brazier and whistled the gay tune sifting from the remotely twinkling palace. The Mouser, now re-oiling the blade of Scalpel against the mist, observed, "For one beset by taints and danger-hums, you're very jolly."

"I like it here," the northerner asserted. "A fig for courts and beds and inside fires! The edge of life is keener in the street—as on the mountaintop. Is not imagined wine sweeter than wine?" ("Ho!" the Mouser laughed, most sardonically.) "And is not a crust of bread tastier to one an-hungered than larks' tongues to an epicure? Adversity makes the keenest appetite, the clearest vision."

"There spoke the ape who could not reach the apple," the Mouser told him. "If a door to paradise opened in that wall there, you'd dive through."

"Only because I've never been to paradise," Fafhrd swept on. "Is it not sweeter now to hear the music of Innesgay's betrothal from afar than mingle with the feasters, jig with them, be cramped and blinkered by their social rituals?"

"There's many a one in Lankhmar gnawn fleshless with envy by those sounds tonight," the Mouser said darkly. "I am not gnawn so much as those stupid ones. I am more intelligently jealous. Still, the answer to your question: no!"

"Sweeter by far tonight to be Glipkerio's watchman than his pampered guest," Fafhrd insisted, caught up by his own poetry and hardly hearing the Mouser.

"You mean we serve Glipkerio *free*?" the latter demanded loudly. "Aye, there's the bitter core of all freedom: no pay!"

Fafhrd laughed, came to himself, and said almost abashedly, "Still, there is something in the keenness and the watchman part. We're watchmen not for pay, but solely for the watching's sake! Indoors and warm and comforted, a man is blind. Out here we see the city and the stars, we hear the rustle and the tramp of life, we crouch like hunters in a stony blind, straining our senses for—"

"Please, Fafhrd, no more danger signs," the Mouser protested. "Next you'll be telling me there's a monster a-drool and a-stalk in the streets, all slavering for Innesgay and her betrothal-maids, no doubt. And perchance a sword-garnished princeling or two, for appetizer."

Fafhrd gazed at him soberly and said, peering around through

the thickening mist, "When I am *quite* sure of that, I'll let you know."

THE twin brothers Kreshmar and Skel, assassins and alley-bashers by trade, were menacing a miser in his hovel when the red-veined fog came in after them. As swiftly as ambitious men take last bite and wine-swig at a family dinner when unexpectedly summoned to the emperor's banquet board, the two finished their business. Kreshmar neatly bludgeoned a crater in the miser's skull while Skel thrust into his belt the one small purse of gold they had thus far extorted from the ancient man now turning to corpse. They stepped briskly outside, their swords a-swing at their hips, and into the fog, where they marched side-by-side with Gnarlag and Gis in the midst of the compact pale mass that moved almost indistinguishably with the river fog and yet intoxicated them as surely as if it were a clouded white wine of murder and destruction, zestfully sluicing away all natural cautions and fears, promising an infinitude of thrilling and most profitable victims.

Behind the four marchers, the false fog thinned to a single glimmering thread, red as an artery, silver as a nerve, that led back unbroken around many a stony corner to the Temple of the

Hates. A pulsing went ceaselessly along the thread, as nourishment and purpose were carried from the Temple to the marauding fog mass and to the four killers, now doubly hate-enslaved, marching along with it. The fog mass moved purposefully as a snow tiger toward the quarter of the nobles and Glipkerio's rainbow-lanterned palace above the break-water of the Inner Sea.

Three black-clad police of Lankhmar, armed with metal-capped cudgels and weighted wickedly-barbed darts, saw the thicker fog mass coming and the marchers in it. The impression to them was of four men frozen in a sort of pliant ice. Their flesh crawled. They felt paralyzed. The fog fingered them, but almost instantly passed them by as inferior material for its purpose.

Knives and swords licked out of the fog mass. With never a cry the three police fell, their black tunics glistening with a fluid that showed red only on their sallow slack limbs. The fog mass thickened, as if it had fed instantly and richly on its victims. The four marchers became almost invisible from the outside, though from the inside they saw clearly enough.

FAR down the longest and most landward of the five alleyways, the Mouser saw by the palace-glimmer behind him the white

mass coming, shooting questing tendrils before it, and cried gayly, "Look, Fafhrd, we've company! The fog comes all the twisty way from the Hlal to war its paddy paws at our little fire."

Fafhrd, frowning his eyes, said mistrustfully, "I think it masks other guests."

"Don't be a scareling," the Mouser reproved him in a fey voice. "I've a droll thought, Fafhrd: what if it be not fog, but the smoke of all the poppy-gum and hemp-resin in Lankhmar burning at once? What joys we'll have once we are sniffing it! What dreams we'll have tonight!"

"I think it brings nightmares," Fafhrd asserted softly, rising in a half crouch. Then, "Mouser, the taint! And my sword tingles to the touch!"

The questingmost of the swiftly-advancing fog tendrils fingered them both then and seized on them joyously, as if here were the two captains it had been seeking, the slave-leadership which would render it invincible.

The two blood-brothers tall and small felt to the full then the intoxication of the fog, its surging bittersweet touch-song of hate, its hot promises of all blood-lusts forever fulfilled, an uninhibited eternity of murder-madness.

Fafhrd, wineless tonight, intoxicated only by his own ideal-

isms and the thought of watchmanship, was hardly touched by the sensations, did not feel them as temptations at all.

The Mouser, much of whose nature was built on hates and envies, had a harder time, but he too in the end rejected the fog's masterful lures—if only, to put the worst interpretation on it, because he wanted always to be the source of his own evil and would never accept it from another, not even as a gift from the archfiend himself.

The fog shrank back a dozen paces then, cat-quick, like a vixenishly proud woman rebuffed, revealing the four marchers in it and simultaneously pointing tendrils straight at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

IT was well for the Mouser then that he knew the membership of Lankhmar's underworld to the last semiprofessional murderer and that his intuitions and reflexes were both arrow-swift. He recognized the smallest of the four—Gis with his belt of knives—as also the most immediately dangerous. Without hesitation he whipped Cat's-claw from its sheath, poised, aimed, and threw equally knowledgeable and swift of thought and speedy of reaction, hurled one of his knives.

But the Mouser, forever cautious and wisely fearful, snatched his head to one side the

moment he'd made his throw, so that Gis's knife only sliced his ear flap as it hummed past.

Gis, trusting too supremely in his own speed, made no similar evasive movement—with the result that the hilt of Cat's-claw stood out from his right eye-socket an instant later. For a long moment he peered with shock and surprise from his other eye, then slumped to the cobbles, his features contorted in the ultimate agony.

Kreshmar and Skel swiftly drew their swords and Gnarlak his two, not one whit intimidated by the winged death that had bitten into their comrade's brain.

Fafhrd, with a fine feeling for tactics on a broad front, did not draw sword at first but snatched up the brazier by one of its three burningly hot short legs and whirled its meager red-glowing contents in the attackers' faces.

This stopped them long enough for the Mouser to draw Scalpel and Fafhrd his heavier cave-forged sword. He wished he could do without the brazier—it was much too hot, but seeing himself opposed to Gnarlak of the Two Swords, he contented himself with shifting it jugglingly to his left hand.

Thereafter the fight was one swift sudden crisis. The three attackers, daunted only a moment by the spray of hot coals and quite uninjured by them,

raced forward surefootedly. Four truly-aimed blades thrust at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

The northerner parried Gnarlak's righthand sword with the brazier and his lefthand sword with the guard of his own weapon, which he managed simultaneously to thrust through the bravo's neck.

The shock of that death-stroke was so great that Gnarlak's two swords, bypassing Fafhrd one to each side, made no second stroke in their wielder's death-spasm. Fafhrd, conscious now chiefly of an agonizing pain in his left hand, chucked the brazier away in the nearest useful direction—which happened to be at Skel's head, spoiling that one's thrust at the Mouser, who was skipping nimbly back at the moment, though not more swiftly than Kreshmar and Skel were attacking.

The Mouser ducked under Kreshmar's blade and thrust Scalpel *up* through the assassin's ribs—the easy way to the heart—then quickly whipped it out and gave the same measured dose of thin steel to the dazedly staggering Skel. Then he danced away, looking around him dartingly and holding his sword high and menacing.

"All down and dead," Fafhrd, who'd had longer to look, assured him. "Ow, Mouser, I've burnt my fingers!"

"And I've a dissected ear," that one reported, exploring cautiously with little pats. He grinned. "Just at the edge though." Then, having digested Fafhrd's remark, "Serve you right for fighting with a kitchen boy's weapon!"

Fafhrd retorted, "Bah! If you weren't such a miser with the charcoal, I'd have blinded them all with my ember-cast!"

"And burnt your fingers even worse," the Mouser countered pleasantly. Then, still more happy-voiced, "Methought I heard gold chink at the belt of the one you brazier-bashed. Skel . . . yes, alley-basher Skel. When I've recovered Cat's-claw—"

HE broke off because of an ugly little sucking sound that ended in a tiny *plop*. In the hazy glow from the nobles' quarter they saw an horridly supernatural sight: the Mouser's bloody dagger poised above Gis's punctured eye-socket, supported only by a coiling white tentacle of the fog which had masked their attackers and which had now grown still more dense, as if it had sucked supreme nutriment—as indeed it had—from its dead servitors in their dying.

All around was a faint clattering of steel against cobble: other fog tentacles were lifting the four dropped swords and Gis's knife, while yet others were

groping at that dead cutthroat's belt for his undrawn weapons.

It was as if some great ghost squid from the depths of the Inner Sea were arming itself for combat.

And four yards above the ground, at the rooting point of the tentacles in the thickened fog, a red disk was forming in the center of the fog's body, as it were—a reddish disk that looked moment by moment more like a single eye large as a face.

There was the inescapable thought that as soon as that eye could see, some ten beweaponed tentacles would thrust or slash at once, unerringly.

Fafhrd stood between the swiftly-forming eye and the Mouser. The latter, suddenly inspired, gripped Scalpel firmly, readied himself for a dash, and cried to the tall northerner, "Make a stirrup!"

Guessing the Mouser's stratagem, Fafhrd laced his fingers together and went into a half crouch. The Mouser raced forward and planted his right foot in the stirrup Fafhrd had made of his hands and kicked off from it just as the latter helped his jump with a great heave—and a simultaneous "Ow!" of extreme pain.

The Mouser, preceded by his exactly aimed sword, went straight through the reddish ectoplasmic eye-disk, dispersing

it entirely. Then he vanished from Fafhrd's view as suddenly and completely as if he had been swallowed up by a snowbank.

An instant later the armed tentacles began to thrust and slash about, at random and erratically, as blind swordsmen might. But since there were a full ten of them, some of the strokes came perilously close to Fafhrd and he had to dodge and duck to keep out of the way. At the rutch of his shoes on the cobbles the tentacle-wielded swords and knives began to aim themselves a little better, again as blind swordsmen might, and he had to dodge more nimbly—not the easiest or safest work for a man so big. A dispassionate observer, if such had been conceivable and available, might have decided the ghost squid was trying to make Fafhrd dance.

MEANWHILE on the other side of the white monster, the Mouser had caught sight of the pinkishly silver thread and, leaping high as it lifted to evade him, slashed it with the tip of Scalpel. It offered more resistance to his sword than the whole fog-body had and parted with a most unnatural and unexpected *twang* as he cut it through.

Immediately the fog body collapsed and far more swiftly than any punctured bladder—rather it fell apart like a giant white

puffball kicked by a giant boot—and the tentacles fell to pieces too and the swords and knives came clattering down harmlessly on the cobbles and there was a swift fleeting rush of stench that made both Fafhrd and the Mouser clap hand to nose and mouth.

After sniffing cautiously and finding the air breathable again, the Mouser called brightly, "Hola there, dear comrade! I think I cut the thing's thin throat, or heart string, or vital nerve, or silver tether, or birth cord, or whatever the strand was."

"Where did the strand lead back to?" Fafhrd demanded.

"I have no intention of trying to find that out," the Mouser assured him, gazing warily over his shoulder in the direction from which the fog had come. "You try threading the Lankhmar labyrinth if you want to. But the strand seems as gone as the thing."

"Ow!" Fafhrd cried out suddenly and began to flap his hands. "Oh you small villain, to trick me into making a stirrup of my burnt hands!"

The Mouser grinned as he poked about with his gaze at the nastily slimed cobbles and the dead bodies and the scattered hardware. "Cat's-claw must be here somewhere," he muttered, "and I did hear the chink of gold . . ."

"You'd feel a penny under the tongue of a man you were strangling!" Fafhrd told him angrily.

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At the Temple of the Hates, five thousand worshippers began to rise up weakly and groaningly, each lighter of weight by some few ounces than when he had first bowed down. The drummers slumped over their drums, the lantern-crankers over their extinguished red candles, and the lank archpriest wearily and grimly lowered his head and rested the wooden mask in his clawlike hands.

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At the alley-juncture the Mouser dangled before Fafhrd's face the small purse he had just slipped from Skel's belt.

"My noble comrade, shall we make a betrothal gift of it to sweet Innesgay?" he asked liltily. "And rekindle the dear little brazier and end this night as we began it, savoring all the matchless joys of watchmanship and all the manifold wonders of—"

"Give't here, idiot boy!" Fafhrd snarled, snatching the chinking thing for all his burnt fingers. "I know a place where they've soothing salves—and needles too, to stitch up the notched ears of thieves—and where both the wine and the girls are sharp and clean!"

THE END