

## The Death of Malygris

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At the hour of interlunar midnight, when lamps burned rarely and far apart in Susran, and slow-moving autumn clouds had muffled the stars, King Gadeiron sent forth into the sleeping city twelve of his trustiest mutes. Like shadows gliding through oblivion, they vanished upon their various ways; and each of them, returning presently to the darkened palace, led with him a shrouded figure no less discreet and silent than himself.

In this manner, groping along tortuous alleys, through blind cypress-caverns in the royal gardens, and down subterranean halls and steps, twelve of the most powerful sorcerers of Susran were brought together in a vault of oozing, death-gray granite, far beneath the foundations of the palace.

The entrance of the vault was guarded by earth-demons that obeyed the arch-sorcerer, Maranapion, who had long been the king's councillor. These demons would have torn limb from limb any who came unprepared to offer them a libation of fresh blood. The vault was lit dubiously by a single lamp, hollowed from a monstrous garnet, and fed with vipers' oil. Here Gadeiron, crownless, and wearing sackcloth dyed in sober purple, awaited the wizards on a seat of limestone wrought in the form of a sarcophagus. Maranapion stood at his right hand, immobile, and swathed to the mouth in the garments of the tomb. Before him was a tripod of orichalchum, rearing shoulder-high; and on the tripod, in a silver socket, there reposed the enormous blue eye of a slain Cyclops, wherein the archimage was said to behold weird visions. On this eye, gleaming balefully under the garnet lamp, the gaze of Maranapion was fixed with death-like rigidity.

From these circumstances, the twelve sorcerers knew that the king had convened them only because of a matter supremely grave and secret. The hour and fashion of their summoning, the place of meeting, the terrible elemental guards, the mufti worn by Gadeiron -- all were proof of a need for preternatural stealth and privacy.

For awhile there was silence in the vault, and the twelve, bowing deferentially, waited the will of Gadeiron. Then, in a voice that was little more than a harsh whisper, the king spoke:

"What know ye of Malygris?"

Hearing that awful name, the sorcerers paled and trembled visibly; but, one by one, as if speaking by rote, several of the foremost made answer to Gadeiron's question.

"Malygris dwells in his black tower above Susran," said the first. "The night of his power is still heavy upon Poseidonis; and we others, moving in that night, are as shadows of a withered moon. He is overlord of all kings and sorcerers. Yea, even the triremes that fare to Tartessos, and the far-flown eagles of the sea, pass not beyond the black falling of his shadow."

"The demons of the five elements are his familiars," said the second. "The gross eyes of common men have beheld them often, flying like birds about his tower, or crawling lizard-wise on the walls and pavements."

"Malygris sits in his high hall," avowed the third. "Unto him, tribute is borne at the full moon from all the cities of Poseidonis. He takes a tithe of the lading of every galley. He claims a share of the silver and incense, of the gold and ivory sacred to the temples. His wealth is beyond the opulence of the sunken kings of Atlantis... even those kings who were thy forefathers, O Gadeiron."

"Malygris is old as the moon," mumbled a fourth. "He will live for ever, armed against death with the dark magic of the moon. Death has become a slave in his citadel, toiling among other slaves, and striking only at the foes of Malygris."

"Much of this was true formerly," quoth the king, with a sinister hissing of his breath. "But now a certain doubt has arisen... for it may be that Malygris is dead."

A communicated shiver seemed to run about the assembly. "Nay," said the sorcerer who had affirmed the immortality of Malygris. "For how can this thing have come to pass? The doors of his tower stood open today at sunset; and the priests of the ocean-god, bearing a gift of pearls and purple dyes, went in before Malygris, and found him sitting in his tall chair

of the ivory of mastodons. He received them haughtily, without speaking, as is his wont; and his servants, who are half ape and half man, came in unbidden to carry away the tribute."

"This very night," said another, "I saw the steadfast lamps of the sable tower, burning above the city like the eyes of Taaran, god of Evil. The familiars have departed not from the tower as such beings depart at the dying of a wizard: for in that case, men would have heard their howling and lamentation in the dark."

"Aye," declared Gadeiron, "men have been befooled ere this. And Malygris was ever the master of illuding shows, of feints, and beguilements. But there is one among us who discerns the truth. Maranapion, through the eye of the Cyclops, has looked on remote things and hidden places, Even now, he peers upon his ancient enemy, Malygris."

Maranapion, shuddering a little beneath his shroud-like garments, seemed to return from his clairvoyant absorption. He raised from the tripod his eyes of luminousamber, whose pupils were black and impenetrable as jet.

"I have seen Malygris," he said, turning to the conclave. "Many times I have watched him thus, thinking to learn some secret of his close-hidden magic, I have spied upon him at noon, at evenfall, and through the drear, lampless vigils of midnight. And I have beheld him in the ashen dawn and the dawn of quickening fire. But always he sits in the great ivory chair, in the high hall of his tower, frowning as if with meditation. And his hands clutch always the basilisk-carven arms of the chair, and his eyes turn evermore, unshutting, unblinking, toward the orient window and the heavens beyond where only high-risen stars and clouds go by.

"Thus have I beheld him for the space of a whole year and a month. And each day I have seen his monsters bring before him vessels filled with rare meat and drink: and later they have taken away the vessels untouched. And never have I discerned the least movement of his lips, nor any turning or tremor of his body.

"For these reasons, I deem that Malygris is dead; but by virtue of his supremacy in evil and in art magical, he sits defying the worm, still undecayed and incorrupt. And his monsters and his familiars attend him still, deceived by the lying appearance of life; and his power, though now an empty fraud, is still dark and awful upon Poseidonis."

Again, following the slow-measured words of Maranapion, there was silence in the vault. A dark, furtive triumph smoldered in the face of Gadeiron, on whom the yoke of Malygris had lain heavily, irking his pride. Among the twelve sorcerers, there was none who wished well to Malygris, nor any who did not fear him; and they received the annunciation of his demise with dreadful, half-incredulous joy. Some there were who doubted, holding that Maranapion was mistaken; and in the faces of all, as in somber mirrors, their awe of the master was still reflected.

Maranapion, who had hated Malygris above all others, as the one warlock whose art and power excelled his own, stood aloof and inscrutable like a poisoning vulture.

It was King Gadeiron who broke the gravid silence.

"Not idly have I called ye to this crypt, O sorcerers of Susran: for a work remains to be done. Verily, shall the corpse of a dead necromancer tyrannize over us all? There is mystery here, and a need to move cautiously, for the duration of his necromancy is yet unverified and untested. But I have called ye together in order that the hardiest among ye may take council with Maranapion, and aid him in devising such wizardry as will now expose the fraud of Malygris, and evince his mortality to all men, as well as to the fiends that follow him still, and the ministering monsters.

A babble of disputation rose, and they who were most doubtful of this matter, and feared to work against Malygris in any fashion, begged Gadeiron's leave to withdraw. In the end, there remained seven of the twelve...

Swiftly, by dim and covert channels, on the day that followed, the death of Malygris was bruited throughout the isle Poseidonis. Many disbelieved the story, for the might of the wizard was a thing seared as with hot iron on the souls of them that had witnessed his thaumaturgies. However, it was recalled that during the past year few had beheld him face to face; and always he had seemed to ignore them, speaking not, and staring fixedly through the tower window, as if intent on far things that were veiled to others. During that time, he had called no man to his presence, and had sent forth no message, no oracle or decree; and they who had gone before him were mainly bearers of tribute and had followed a long-established custom.

When these matters became generally known, there were some who maintained that he sat thus in a long swoon of ecstasy or catalepsy, and would awaken therefrom in time. Others, however, held that he had died, and was able to preserve the deceitful aspect of life through a spell that endured after him. No man dared to enter the tall, sable tower; and still the shadow of the tower fell athwart Susran like the shadow of an evil gnomon moving on some disastrous dial; and still the umbrage of the power of Malygris lay stagnant as the tomb's night on the minds of men.

Now, among the five sorcerers who had begged Gadeiron's leave to depart, fearing to join their fellows in the making of wizardry against Malygris, there were two that plucked heart a little afterward, when they heard from other sources a confirmation of the vision beheld by Maranapion through the Cyclop's eye.

These two were brothers, named Nygon and Fustules. Feeling a certain shame for their timidity, and desiring to rehabilitate themselves in the regard of the others, they conceived an audacious plan.

When night had again fallen upon the city, bringing no moon, but only obscure stars and the scud of sea-born clouds, Nygon and Fustules went forth through the darkened ways and came to the steep hill at the heart of Susran, whereon, in half-immemorial years, Malygris had established his grim citadel.

The hill was wooded with close-grown cypresses, whose foliage, even to the full sun, was black and sombre as if tarnished by wizard fumes. Crouching on either hand, they leaned like misshapen spirits of the night above the stairs of adamant that gave access to the tower. Nygon and Fustules, mounting the stairs, cowered and trembled when the boughs swung menacingly toward them in violent gusts of wind. They felt the dripping of heavy sea-dews, blown in their faces like a spittle of demons. The wood, it seemed, was full of execrably sighing voices, and weird whimpers and little moanings as of imp-children astray from Satanic dams.

The lights of the tower burned through the waving boughs, and seemed to recede unapproachably as they climbed. More than once the two regretted their temerity, but at length, without suffering palpable harm or hindrance, they neared the portals, which stood eternally open, pouring the effulgence of still, unflaring lamps on the windy darkness.

Though the plan they had conceived was nefarious, they deemed it best to enter boldly. The purpose of their visit if any should challenge or interrogate them was the asking of an oracle from Malygris, who was famed throughout the isle as the most infallible of soothsayers.

Freshening momentarily from the sea beyond Susran, the wind clamored about the tower like an army of devils in flight from deep to deep, and the long mantles of the sorcerers were blown in their faces. But, entering the wide portals, they heard no longer the crying of the gale, and felt no more its pursuing rudeness. At a single step they passed into mausolean silence. Around them the lamplight fell unshaken on caryatids of black marble, on mosaics of precious gems, on fabulous metals and many-storied tapestries; and a tideless perfume weighed upon the air like a balsam of death. They felt an involuntary awe, deeming the mortal stillness a thing that was hardly natural. But, seeing that the tower vestibule was unguarded by any of the creatures of Malygris, they were emboldened to go on and climb the marmorean stairs to the apartments above.

Everywhere, by the light of opulent lamps, they beheld inestimable and miraculous treasures. There were tables of ebony wrought with sorcerous runes of pearl and white coral; webs of silver and samite, cunningly pictured; caskets of electrum overflowing with talismanic jewels; tiny gods of jade and agate; and tall chryselephantine demons. Here was the loot of ages, lying heaped and mingled in utter negligence, without lock or ward, as if free for any casual thief.

Eyeing the riches about them with covetous wonder, the two sorcerers mounted slowly from room to room, unchallenged and unmolested, and came ultimately to that upper hall in which Malygris was wont to receive his visitors.

Here, as elsewhere, the portals stood open before them, and lamps burned as if in a trance of light. The lust of plunder was hot in their hearts. Made bolder still by the seeming desolation, and thinking now that the tower was uninhabited by any but the dead magician, they went in with little hesitancy.

Like the rooms below, the chamber was full of precious artifacts; and iron-bound volumes and brazen books of occult, tremendous necromancy, together with golden and earthen censers, and vials of unshatterable crystal, were strewn in weird confusion about the mosaic floor. At the very center there sat the old archimage in his chair of primeval ivory, peering with stark, immovable eyes at the night-black window.

Nygon and Fustules felt their awe return upon them, remembering too clearly now the thrice-baleful mastery that this man had wielded, and the demon lore he had known, and the spells he had wrought that were irrefragable by other wizards. The specters of these things rose up before them as if by a final necromancy. With down-dropped eyes and humble mien, they went forward, bowing reverentially. Then, speaking aloud, in accordance with their predetermined plan, Fustules requested an oracle of their fortunes from Malygris.

There was no answer, and lifting their eyes, the brothers were greatly reassured by the aspect of the seated ancient. Death alone could have set the grayish pallor on the brow, could have locked the lips in a rigor as of fast-frozen clay. The eyes were like cavern-shadowed ice, holding no other light than a vague reflection of the lamps. Under the beard that was half silver, half sable, the cheeks had already fallen in as with beginning decay, showing the harsh outlines of the skull. The gray and hideously shrunken hands, whereon the eyes of enchanted beryls and rubies burned, were clenched inflexibly on the chair-arms which had the form of arching basilisks.

"Verily," murmured Nygon, "there is naught here to frighten or dismay us. Behold, it is only the lich of an old man after all, and one that has cheated the worm of his due provender overlong."

"Aye," said Fustules. "But this man, in his time, was the greatest of all necromancers. Even the ring on his little finger is a sovereign talisman. The balas-ruby of the thumbing of his right hand will conjure demons from out of the deep. In the volumes that lie about the chamber, there are secrets of perished gods and the mysteries of planets immemorial. In the vials, there are sirups that give strange visions, and philtres that can revive the dead. Among these things, it is ours to choose freely."

Nygon, eyeing the gems greedily, selected a ring that encircled the right forefinger with the sixfold coils of a serpent of orichalchum, bearing in its mouth a beryl shaped like a griffin's egg. Vainly, however, he tried to loosen the finger from its rigid clutch on the chair-arm, to permit the removal of the ring. Muttering impatiently, he drew a knife from his girdle and prepared to hew away the finger. In the meanwhile, Fustules had drawn his own knife as a preliminary before approaching the other hand.

"Is thy heart firm within thee, brother?" he inquired in a sort of sibilant whisper. "If so, there is even more to be gained than these talismanic rings. It is well known that a wizard who attains to such supremacy as Malygris, undergoes by virtue thereof a complete bodily transformation, turning his flesh into elements more subtle than those of common flesh. And whoso eats of his flesh even so much as a tiny morsel will share thereafter in the powers owned by the wizard."

Nygon nodded as he bent above the chosen finger. "This, too, was in my thought," he answered.

Before he or Fustules could begin their ghoulish attack, they were startled by a venomous hissing that appeared to emanate from the bosom of Malygris. They drew back in amazement and consternation, while a small coral viper slid from behind the necromancer's beard, and glided swiftly over his knees to the floor like a sinuous rill of scarlet. There, coiling as if to strike, it regarded the thieves with eyes that were cold and malignant as drops of frozen poison.

"By the black thorns of Taaran!" cried Fustules. "It is one of Malygris' familiars. I have heard of this viper--"

Turning, the two would have fled from the room. But, even as they turned, the walls and portals seemed to recede before them, fleeing giddily and interminably, as if unknown gulfs had been admitted to the chamber. A vertigo seized them; reeling, they saw the little segments of mosaic under their feet assume the proportions of mighty flags. Around them the strewn books and censers and vials loomed enormous, rearing above their heads and barring their way as they ran.

Nygon, looking over his shoulder, saw that the viper had turned to a vast python, whose crimson coils were undulating swiftly along the floor. In a colossal chair, beneath lamps that were large as suns, there sat the colossal form of the dead archimage, in whose presence Nygon and Fustules were no more than pigmies. The lips of Malygris were still immobile beneath his beard; and his eyes still glared implacably upon the blackness of the far window. But at that instant a voice filled the awful spaces of the room, reverberating like thunder in the heavens, hollow and tremendous:

"Fools! ye have dared to ask me for an oracle. And the oracle is -- death!"

Nygon and Fustules, knowing their doom, fled on in a madness of terror and desperation. Beyond the towering thuribles, the tomes that were piled like pyramids, they saw the threshold in intermittent glimpses, like a remote horizon. It withdrew before them, dim and unattainable. They panted as runners pant in a dream. Behind them, the vermilion python crawled; and overtaking them as they tried to round the brazen back of a wizard volume, it struck them down like fleeing dormice...

In the end, there was only a small coral viper, that crept back to its hiding-place in the bosom of Malygris...

Toiling by day and night, in the vaults under the palace of Gadeiron, with impious charms and unholy conjurations, and fouler chemistries, Maranapion and his seven coadjutors had nearly completed the making of their sorcery.

They designed an involution against Malygris that would break the power of the dead necromancer by rendering evident to all the mere fact of his death. Employing an unlawful Atlantean science, Maranapion had created living plasm with all the attributes of human flesh, and had caused it to grow and flourish, fed with blood.

Then he and his assistants, uniting their wills and convoking the forces that were blasphemy to summon, had compelled the shapeless, palpitating mass to put forth the limbs and members of a new-born child; and had formed it ultimately, after all the changes that man would undergo between birth and senescence, into an image of Malygris.

Now, carrying the process even further, they caused the simulacrum to die of extreme age, as Malygris had apparently died. It sat before them in a chair, facing toward the east, and duplicating the very posture of the magician on his seat of ivory.

Nothing remained to be done. Forspent and weary, but hopeful, the sorcerers waited for the first signs of mortal decay in the image. If the spells they had woven were successful, a simultaneous decay would occur in the body of Malygris, incorruptible heretofore. Inch by inch, member by member, he would rot in the adamant tower; His familiars would desert him, no longer deceived; and all who came to the tower would know his mortality; and the tyranny of Malygris would lift from Susran, and his necromancy be null and void as a broken pentacle in sea-girt Poseidonis.

For the first time since the beginning of their involution, the eight magicians were free to intermit their vigilance without peril of invalidating the charm. They slept soundly, feeling that their repose was well earned. On the morrow they returned, accompanied by King Gadeiron, to the vault in which they had left the plasmic image.

Opening the sealed door, they were met by a charnel odor, and were gratified to perceive in the figure the unmistakable signs of decomposition. A little later, by consulting the Cyclops' eye, Maranapion verified the paralleling of these marks in the features of Malygris.

A great jubilation, not unmingled with relief, was felt by the sorcerers and by King Gadeiron. Heretofore, not knowing the extent and duration of the powers wielded by the dead master, they had been doubtful of the efficacy of their own magic. But now, it seemed, there was no longer any reason for doubt.

On that very day it happened that certain seafaring merchants went before Malygris to pay him, according to custom, a share of the profits of their latest voyage. Even as they bowed in the presence of the master, they became aware, by sundry disagreeable tokens, that they had borne tribute to a corpse. Not daring even then to refuse the long-exacted toll, they flung it down and fled from the place in terror.

Soon, in all Susran, there was none who doubted any longer the death of Malygris. And yet, such was the awe he had wrought through many lustrums, that few were venturous enough to invade the tower; and thieves were wary, and would not try to despoil its fabled treasures.

Day by day, in the blue, monstrous eye of the Cyclops, Maranapion saw the rotting of his dreaded rival. And upon him presently there came a strong desire to visit the tower and behold face to face that which he had witnessed only in vision. Thus alone would his triumph be complete.

So it was that he and the sorcerers who had aided him, together with King Gadeiron, went up to the sable tower by the steps of adamant, and climbed by the marble stairs, even as Nygon and Fustules before them, to the high room in which

Malygris was seated... But the doom of Nygon and Fustules, being without other witnesses than the dead, was wholly unknown to them.

Boldly and with no hesitation they entered the chamber. Slanting through the western window, the sun of late afternoon fell goldenly on the dust that had gathered everywhere. Spiders had woven their webs on the bright-jeweled censers, on the graven lamps, and the metal-covered volumes of sorcery. The air was stagnant with a stifling foulness of death.

The intruders went forward, feeling that impulse which leads the victors to exult over a vanquished enemy. Malygris sat unbowed and upright, his black and tattered fingers clutching the ivory chair-arms as of yore, and his empty orbits glowering still at the eastern window. His face was little more than a bearded skull; and his blackening brow was like worm-pierced ebony.

"O Malygris, I give thee greeting," said Maranapion in a loud voice of mockery. "Grant, I beseech thee, a sign, if thy wizardry still prevails, and hath not become the appanage of oblivion."

"Greeting, O Maranapion," replied a grave and terrible voice that issued from the maggot-eaten lips. "Indeed, I will grant thee a sign. Even as I, in death, have rotted upon my seat from the foul sorcery which was wrought in the vaults of King Gadeiron, so thou and thy fellows and Gadeiron, living, shall decay and putrefy wholly in an hour, by virtue of the curse that I put upon ye now."

Then the shrunken corpse of Malygris, fulminating the runes of an old Atlantean formula, cursed the eight sorcerers and King Gadeiron. The formula, at frequent intervals, was cadenced with fatal names of lethal gods; and in it were told the secret appellations of the black god of time, and the Nothingness that abides beyond time; and use was made of the titles of many tomb-lairing demons. Heavy and hollow-sounding were the runes, and in them one seemed to hear a noise of great blows on sepulchral doors, and a clangor of downfallen slabs. The air darkened as if with the hovering of seasonless night, and thereupon, like a breathing of the night, a chillness entered the chamber; and it seemed that the black wings of ages passed over the tower, beating prodigiously from void to void, ere the curse was done.

Hearing that maranatha, the sorcerers were dumb with the extremity of their dread; and even Maranapion could recall no counter-spell effectual in any degree against it. All would have fled from the room ere the curse ended, but a mortal weakness was upon them, and they felt a sickness as of quick-coming death. Shadows were woven athwart their eyes; but through the shadows, each beheld dimly the instant blackening of the faces of his fellows, and saw the cheeks fall ruinously, and the lips curl back on the teeth like those of long-dead cadavers.

Trying to run, each was aware of his own limbs that rotted beneath him, pace by pace, and felt the quick sloughing of his flesh in corruption from the bone. Crying out with tongues that shriveled ere the cry was done, they fell down on the floor of the chamber. Life lingered in them, together with the dire knowledge of their doom, and they preserved something of hearing and sight. In the dark agony of their live corruption, they tossed feebly to and fro, and crawled inchmeal on the chill mosaic. And they still moved in this fashion, slowly and more imperceptibly, till their brains were turned to gray mold, and the sinews were parted from their bones, and the marrow was dried up.

Thus, in an hour, the curse was accomplished. The enemies of the necromancer lay before him, supine and shrunken, in the tomb's final posture, as if doing obeisance to a seated Death. Except for the garments, none could have told King Gadeiron from Maranapion, nor Maranapion from the lesser wizards.

The day went by, declining seaward; and, burning like a royal pyre beyond Susran the sunset flung an aureate glare through the window, and then dropped away in red brands and funereal ashes. And in the twilight a coral viper glided from the bosom of Malygris, and weaving among the remnant of them that lay on the floor, and slipping silently down the stairs of marble, it passed forever from the tower.