

The Garden of Adompha

Clark Ashton Smith

"Lord of the sultry, red parterres
And orchards sunned by hell's unsetting flame!
Amid thy garden blooms the Tree which bears
Unnumbered heads of demons for its fruit;
And, like a slithering serpeat, runs the root
That is called Baaras;
And there the forky, pale mandragoras,
Self-torn from out the soil, go to and fro,
Calling upon thy name:
Till man new-damned will deem that devils pass,
Crying in wrathful frenzy and strange woe."
-Ludar's Litany to Thasaïdon

It was well known that Adompha, king of the wide orient isle of Sotar, possessed amid his far-stretching palace grounds a garden secret from all men except himself and the court magician, Dwerulas. The square-built granite walls of the garden, high and formidable as those of a prison, were plain for all to see, rearing above the stately beefwood and camphor trees, and broad plots of multi-coloured blossoms. But nothing had ever been ascertained regarding its interior: for such care as it required was given only by the wizard beneath Adompha's direction; and the twain spoke thereof in deep riddles that none could interpret. The thick brazen door responded to a mechanism whose mystery they shared with none other; and the king and Dwerulas, whether separately or together, visited the garden only at those hours when others were not abroad. And none could verily boast that he had beheld even so much as the opening of the door.

Men said that the garden had been roofed over against the sun with great sheets of lead and copper, leaving no cranny through which the tiniest star could peer down. Some swore that the privacy of its masters during their visits was ensured by a lethean slumber which Dwerulas, through his magic art, was wont to lay at such times upon the whole vicinity.

A mystery so salient could hardly fail to provoke curiosity, and sundry different beliefs arose concerning the garden's nature. Some averred that it was filled with evil plants of nocturnal habit, that yielded their swift and mordant poisons for Adompha's use, along with more insidious and baleful essences employed by the warlock in the working of his enchantments. Such tales, it seemed, were perhaps not without authority: since, following the construction of the closed garden, there had been at the royal court numerous deaths attributable to poisoning, and disasters that were plainly the sendings of a wizard, together with the bodily vanishment of people whose mundane presence no longer pleased Adompha or Dwerulas.

Other tales, of a more extravagant kind, were whispered among the credulous. That legend of unnatural infamy, which had surrounded the king from childhood, assumed a more hideous tinge; and Dwerulas, who had reputedly been sold to the Archdemon before birth by his haggish mother, acquired a new blackness of renown as one exceeding all other sorcerers in the depth and starkness of his abandonment.

Waking from such slumber and such dreams as the juice of the black poppy had given him, King Adompha rose in the dead, stagnant hours between moonset and dawn. About him the palace lay hushed like a charnel-house, its occupants having yielded to their nightly sopor of wine, drugs and arrack. Around the palace, the gardens and the capital city of Loithé slept beneath slow stars of windless southern heavens. At this time Adompha and Dwerulas were wont to visit the high-walled close with little fear of being followed or observed.

Adompha went forth, pausing but briefly to turn the covert eye of his black bronze lantern into the lampless chamber adjoining his own. The room had been occupied by Thuloneah, his favourite odalisque for the seldom-equalled period of eight nights; but he saw without surprise or disconcertion that the bed of disordered silks was now empty. By this, he felt sure that Dwerulas had preceded him to the garden. And he knew, moreover, that Dwerulas had not gone idly or unburdened.

The grounds of the palace, steeped everywhere in unbroken shadow, appeared to maintain that secrecy which the king preferred. He came to the shut brazen door in the blankly towering wall; emitting, as he approached it, a sharp sibilation like the hissing of a cobra. In response to the rising and falling of this sound, the door swung inwards silently and closed silently behind him.

The garden, planted and tilled so privily, and sealed by its metal roof from the orbs of heaven, was illumined solely by a strange, fiery globe that hung in mid-air at the centre. Adompha regarded this globe with awe, for its nature and purveyance were mysterious to him. Dwerulas claimed that it had risen from hell on a moonless midnight at his bidding, and was levitated by infernal power, and fed with the never-dying flames of that clime in which the fruits of Thasaidon swelled to unearthly size and enchanted savour. It gave forth a sanguine light, in which the garden swam and weltered as if seen through a luminous mist of blood. Even in the bleak nights of winter, the globe yielded a genial warmth; and it fell never from its weird suspension, though without palpable support; and beneath it the garden flourished balefully, lush and exuberant as some parterre of the nether circles.

Indeed, the growths of that garden were such as no terrestrial sun could have fostered, and Dwerulas said that their seed was of like origin with the globe. There were pale, bifurcated trunks that strained upwards as if to disroot themselves from the ground, unfolding immense leaves like the dark and ribbed wings of dragons. There were amaranthine blossoms, broad as salvers, supported by arm-thick stems that trembled continually. And there were many other weird plants, diverse as the seven hells, and having no common characteristics other than the scions which Dwerulas had grafted upon them here and there through his unnatural and necromantic art.

These scions were the various parts and members of human beings. Consumately, and with never failing success, the magician had joined them to the half-vegetable, half-animate stocks on which they lived and grew thereafter, drawing an ichor-like sap. Thus were preserved the carefully chosen souvenirs of a multitude of persons who had inspired Dwerulas and the king with distaste or ennui. On palmy boles, beneath feathery-tufted foliage, the heads of eunuchs hung in bunches, like enormous black drupes. A bare, leafless creeper was flowered with the ears of delinquent guardsmen. Misshapen cacti were fruited with the breasts of women, or foliated with their hair. Entire limbs or torsos had been united with monstrous trees. Some of the huge salver-like blossoms bore palpitating hearts, and certain smaller blooms were centered with eyes that still opened and closed amid their lashes. And there were other graftings, too obscene or repellent for narration.

Adompha went forward among the hybrid growths, which stirred and rustled at his approach. The heads appeared to crane towards him a little, the ears quivered, the breasts shuddered lightly, the eyes widened or narrowed as if watching his progress.

These human remnants, he knew, lived only with the sluggish life of the plants, shared only in their sub-animal activity. He had regarded them with a curious and morbid esthetic pleasure, had found in them the infallible attraction of things enormous and hypernatural. Now, for the first time, he passed among them with a languid interest. He began to apprehend that fatal hour when the garden, with all its novel thaumaturgies, would offer no longer a refuge from his inexorable ennui.

At the core of the strange pleasance, where a circular space was still vacant amid the crowding growths, Adompha came to a mound of loamy fresh-dug earth. Beside it, wholly nude, and supine as if in death, there lay the odalisque Thuloneah. Near her, various knives, and other implements, together with vials of liquid balsams and viscid gums that Dwerulas used in his grafting, had been emptied upon the ground from a leathern bag. A plant known as the dedaim, with a bulbous, pulpy, whitishgreen bole from whose centre rose and radiated several leafless reptilian boughs, dripped upon Thuloneah's bosom an occasional drop of yellowish-red ichor from incisions made in its smooth bark.

Behind the loamy mound, Dwerulas rose to view with the suddenness of a demon emerging from his subterrene lair. In his hands he held the spade with which he had just finished digging a deep and grave-like hole. Beside the regal stature and girth of Adompha, he seemed no more than a wizened dwarf. His aspect bore all the marks of immense age, as if dusty centuries had seared his flesh and sucked the blood from his veins. His eyes glowed in the bottom of pit-like orbits; his features were black and sunken as those of a long-dead corpse; his body was gnarled as some millennial desert cedar. He stooped incessantly so that his lank knotty arms hung almost to the ground. Adompha marvelled, as always, at the well-nigh demoniac strength of those arms; marvelled that Dwerulas could have wielded the heavy shovel so expeditiously, could have carried to the garden on his back without human aid the burden of those victims whose members he had utilized in his experiments. The king had never demeaned himself to assist at such labours; but, after

indicating from time to time the people whose disappearance would in no wise displease him, had done nothing more than watch and supervise the baroque gardening.

'Is she dead?' Adompha questioned, eyeing the luxurious limbs and body of Thuloneah without emotion.

'Nay,' said Dwerulas, in a voice harsh as a rusty coffin-hinge, 'but I have administered to her the drowsy and overpowering juice of the dedaim. Her heart beats impalpably, her blood flows with the sluggishness of that mingled ichor. She will not reawaken... save as a part of the garden's life, sharing its obscure sentience. I wait now your further instructions. What portion... or portions?'

'Her hands were very deft,' said Adompha as if musing aloud, in reply to the half-uttered question 'They knew the subtle ways of love and were learned in all amorous arts. I would have you preserve her hands... but nothing else.'

The singular and magical operation had been completed. The fair, slim, tapering hands of Thuloneah, severed cleanly at the wrists, were attached with little mark of suture to the pale and lopped extremities of the two topmost branches of the dedaim. In this process the magician had employed the gums of infernal plants, and had repeatedly invoked the curious powers of certain underground genii, as was his wont on such occasions. Now, as if in suppliance, the semi-vegetable arms reached out towards Adompha with their human hands. The king felt a revival of his old interest in Dwerulas' horticulture, a queer excitement woke within him before the mingled grotesquery and beauty of the grafted plant. At the same time there lived again in his flesh the subtle ardours of outworn nights... for the hands were filled with memories.

He had quite forgotten Thuloneah's body, lying close by with its maimed arms. Recalled from his reverie by the sudden movement of Dwerulas, he turned and saw the wizard stooping above the unconscious girl; who had not stirred during the whole course of the operation. Blood still flowed and puddled upon the dark earth from the stumps of her wrists. Dwerulas, with that unnatural vigour which informed all his movements, seized the odalisque in his pipy arms and swung her easily aloft. His air was that of a labourer resuming his unfinished task; but he seemed to hesitate before casting her into the hole that would serve as a grave; where, through seasons warmed and illumined by the hell-drawn globe, her golden, decaying body would feed the roots of that anomalous plant which bore her own hands for scions. It was as if he were loath to relinquish his voluptuous burden. Adompha, watching him curiously, was aware as never before of the stark evil and turpitude that flowed like an overwhelming fetor from Dwerulas' hunched body and twisted limbs.

Deeply as he himself had gone into all manner of iniquities, the king felt a vague revulsion. Dwerulas reminded him of a loathsome insect that he had once surprised during its ghoulish activities. He remembered how he had crushed the insect with a stone... and remembering, he conceived one of those bold and sudden inspirations that had always impelled him to equally sudden action. He had not, he told himself, entered the garden with any such thought: but the opportunity was too urgent and too perfect to be overpassed. The wizard's back was turned to him for the nonce; the arms of the wizard were encumbered with their heavy and pulchritudinous load. Snatching up the iron spade, Adompha brought it down on the small, withered head of Dwerulas with a fair amount of war-like strength inherited from heroic and piratic ancestors. The dwarf, still carrying Thuloneah, toppled forward into the deep pit.

Posing the spade for a second blow if such should be necessary, the king waited; but there was neither sound nor movement from the grave. He felt a certain surprise at having overcome with such ease the formidable magician, of whose superhuman powers he was half convinced; a certain surprise, too, at his own temerity. Then, reassured by his triumph, the king bethought him that he might try an experiment of his own: since he believed himself to have mastered much of Dwerulas' peculiar skill and lore through observation. The head of Dwerulas would form a unique and suitable addition to one of the garden plants. However, upon peering into the pit, he was forced to relinquish the idea: for he saw that he had struck only too well and had reduced the sorcerer's head to a state in which it was useless for his experiment, since such graftings required a certain integrity of the human part or member.

Reflecting, not without disgust, on the unlooked-for frailty of the skulls of magicians, which were as easily squashed as emus' eggs, Adompha began to fill the pit with loam. The prone body of Dwerulas, the huddled form of Thuloneah beneath it, sharing the same inertness, were soon covered from view by the soft and dissolving clods. The king, who had grown to fear Dwerulas in his heart, was aware of a distinct relief when he had tamped the grave down very firmly and had leveled it smoothly with the surrounding soil. He told himself that he had done well: for the magician's stock of learning had come latterly to include too many royal secrets; and power such as his, whether drawn from nature or from occult realms, was never quite compatible with the secure dominion and prolonged empire of kings.

At King Adompha's court and throughout the sea-bordering city of Loithé, the vanishment of Dwerulas became the cause of much speculation but little inquiry. There was a division of opinio as to whether Adompha or the fiend Thasaidon could be thanked for so salutary a riddance; and in consequence, the king of Sotar and the lord of the seven hells were both feared and respected as never before. Only the most redoubtable of men or demons could have made away with Dwerulas, who was said to have lived through a whole millenium never sleepiag for one night, and crowding all his hours with iniquities and sorceries of a sub-tartarean blackness.

Following the inhumation of Dwerulas, a dim sentiment of fear and horror, for which he could not altogether account, had prevented the king from revisiting the sealed garden. Smiling impassively at the wild rumours of the court, he continued his search for novel pleasures and violent or rare sensations. In this, however, he met with small success: it seemed that every path, even the most outré and tortuous, led only to the hidden precipice of boredom. Turning from strange loves and cruelties, from extravagant pomps and mad music; from the aphrodisiac censers of far-sought blossoms, the quaintly shapen breasts of exotic girls, he recalled with new longing those semi-animate floral forms that had been endowed by Dwerulas with the most provocative charms of women.

So, on a latter night, at an hour midway between moonfall and sunrise, when all the palace and the city of Loithé were plunged in sodden slumber, the king arose from beside his concubine; and went forth to the garden that was now secret from all men excepting himself.

In answer to the cobra-like sibilation, which alone could actuate its cunning mechanisn, the door opened to Adompha and closed behind him. Even as it closed, he grew aware that a singular change had come upon the garden during his absence. Burning with a bloodier light, a more torrid radiation, the mysterious air-hung globe glared down as it fanned by wrathful demons; and the plants, which had grown excessively in height, and were muffled and hooded with a heavier foliage than they had worn priorly, stood motionless amid an atmosphere that was like the heated breath of some crimson hell.

Adompha hesitated, doubtful of the meaning of these changes. For a moment he thought of Dwerulas, and recalled with a slight shiver certain unexplained prodigies and necromantic feats performed by the wizard... But he had slain Dwerulas and had buried him with his own royal hands. The waxing heat and radiance of that globe, the excessive growth of the garden, were no doubt due to some uncontrolled natural process.

Held by a strong curiosity, the king inhaled the giddyng perfumes that came to assail his nostrils. The light dazzled his eyes filling them with queer, unheard-of colours; the heat smote upon him as if from a nether solstice of infernal summer. He thought that he heard voices, almost inaudible at first, but mounting anon to a half-articulate murmur that seduced his ear with unearthly sweetness. At the same time he seemed to behold amid the stirless vegetation, in flashing glimpses, the half-veiled limbs of dancing bayaderes; limbs that he could not identify with any of the graftings made by Dwerulas.

Drawn by the charm of mystery and seized by a vague intoxication, the king went forward into the hell-born labyrinth. The plants recoiled gently when he neared them, and drew back on either side to permit his passage. As if in arboreal masquerade, they seemed to hide their human scions behind the mantles of their new-grown leafage. Then, closing behind Adompha, they appeared to cast off their disguise, revealing wilder and more anomalous fusions than he had remembered. They changed about him from instant to instant like shapes of delirium, so that he was never quite sure how much of their semblance was tree and flower, how much was woman and man. By turns he beheld a swinging of convulsed foliage, a commotion of riotous limbs and bodies. Then, by some undiscerned transition, it seemed that they were no longer rooted in the ground but were moving about him on dim, fantastic feet in ever-swiftening circles, like the dancers of some bewildering festival.

Around and around Adompha raced the forms that were both floral and human; till the dizzy madness of their motion swirled with an equal vertigo through his brain. He heard the sougning of a storm-driven forest, together with a clamouring of familiar voices that called him by name, that cursed or supplicated, mocked or exhorted, in myriad tones of warrior, councillor, slave, courtling, castrado or leman. Over all, the sanguine globe blazed down with an ever-brightening and more baleful effulgence, an ardour that became always more insupportable. It was as if the whole life of the garden turned and rose and flamed ecstatically to some infernal culmination.

King Adompha had lost all memory of Dwerulas and his dark magic. In his senses burned the ardour of the hell-risen orb, and he seemed to share the delirious motion and ecstasy of those obscure shapes by which he was surrounded. A mad

ichor mounted in his blood; before him hovered the vague images of pleasures he had never known or suspected: pleasures in which he would pass far beyond the ordained limits of mortal sensation.

Then, amid that whirling fantasmagoria, he heard the screeching of a voice that was harsh as some rusty hinge on the lifted lid of a sarcophagus. He could not understand the words: but, as if a spell of stillness had been uttered, the whole garden resumed immediately a hushed and hotted aspect. The king stood in a very stupor: for the voice had been that of Dwerulas! He looked about him wildly, bemazed and bewildered, seeing only the still plants with their mantling of profuse leafage. Before him towered a growth which he somehow recognized as the dedaim, though its bulb-shaped bole and elongated branches had put forth a matted-mass of dark, hair-like filaments.

Very slowly and gently, the two topmost branches of the dedaim descended till their tips were level with Adompha's face. The slender, tapering hands of Thuloneah emerged from their foliage and began to caress the king's cheeks with that loverlike adroitness which he still remembered. At the same moment, he saw the thick hairy matting fall apart upon the broad and flattish top of the dedaim's bole; and from it, as if rearing from hunched shoulders, the small, wizened head of Dwerulas rose up, to confront him...

Still gazing in vacuous horror at the crushed and blood-clotted cranium, at the features seared and blackened as if by centuries, at the eyes that glowed in dark pits like embers blown by demons, Adompha had the confused impression of a multitude of people that hurled themselves upon him from every side. There were no longer any trees in that garden of mad minglings and sorcerous transformations. About him in the fiery air swam faces that he recalled only too well: faces now contorted with rage and the lethal lust of revenge. Through an irony which Dwerulas alone could have conceived, the soft fingers of Thuloneah continued to caress him, while he felt the clutching of numberless hands that tore all his garments into rags and shredded all his flesh with their nails.