

The Light from the Pole

Clark Ashton Smith with Lin Carter

Pharazyn the prophet abode in a tall house of granite built on the cliffy heights above a small fishing-village on the northernmost coasts of Zabdamar, whose rock-bestrewn shores are unceasingly washed by the cold black waters of the polar main. It was quite early in the, reign of the Emperor Charnametros, in the year known to the chroniclers, as the Year of the Green Spider, that Pharazyn first became aware of the imminence of his singular and ineluctable doom by certain small signs and presagings. His dreams were perturbed by malign and shadowy shapes, which ever remained half-glimpsed; cold auroras flamed and flickered unseasonably in the nocturnal heavens, although the season was midsummer; and always, in the loud wind and crying surf, it seemed to Pharazyn that he harkened to the weird whisper of voices from realms of perennial winter.

Now, from atop the granite towers of his high house, it was the wont of Pharazyn to observe the wheeling constellations overhead and to pursue those starry omens which appertain to events yet unborn in the dark womb of time. Of late, these nocturnal portents had been strangely ominous, as well, and yet imprecise: it was as if they prefigured, the encroachment of some curious manner of doom so unique as to stand without precedent in the annals of the astrologic science, which could thus be only hinted at in vague, ambiguous terms. This, as well, was troubling to the serenity of Pharazyn,

As to the relevance of the approaching event, it seemed in some wise to bear upon the destiny of the prophet himself; for the stellar omens were occultly consonant to his own natal house, wherein Fomalhaut was ascendant; and also to that zodiacal sign the astromancers of this epoch termed The Basilisk. But in no degree could the prophet discern with precision or clarity the lineaments of the impending event which would seem to impinge so particularly upon his own personal fate.

And this was the cause of increasing perturbation and unrest within the heart of Pharazyn: that, strive as he might, he could acquire no certain foreknowledge of that which would soon eventuate, nor even an inkling thereunto. Being a past-master of all magic and divination, and a seer of remote and future things, he made use of his arts in an effort to divine their meaning. But a cloud was upon his eye, through the diurnal hours, and a darkness thwarted his vision when he sought illumination in dreams. His horoscopes were put to naught; his familiars were silent or answered him equivocally; and confusion was amidst all his geomancies and hydromancies and haruspications. And it seemed to Pharazyn that an unknown power worked against him, mocking and rendering impotent in such fashion the sorcery that none had defeated heretofore. And Pharazyn knew, by certain tokens perceptible to wizards, that the power was an evil power, and its boding was of bale to man.

Through the middle summer the fisher-folk who dwelt in wattle huts below the tall towers of Pharazyn went forth daily in their coracles of hide and willow and cast their nets in the accustomed manner of their trade. But all that, they gathered from the sea was dead and withered as if in the blast of great coldness such as would emanate from trans-Arctic ice. And they drew forth from their seines living monsters as well, such as their eldest captains had never beheld: things triple-headed and tailed and finned with horror; black, shapeless things that turned to liquid foulness and ran from the net like a vile ichor; or headless shapes like bloated moons with green, frozen rays about them; or things leprous-eyed and bearded with stiffly-oozing slime; It was as if some trans-dimensional and long-blocked channel beneath the known, familiar seas of Earth had opened suddenly into the strange waters of ultra-mundane oceans teeming with repulsive and malformed life.

In awe and wonder at what had come out of the sea-horized north, the fisher-folk withdrew into their huts, abandoning their wonted pursuits of the season; their boats, which fared no longer to sea, were drawn up on the sands below the tall towers of Pharazyn on the cliff. And Pharazyn himself, descending later, also beheld the rotting and unwholesome monsters drawn dripping from the tainted waters, and pondered much concerning the import of this prodigy. For this ill miracle was, he knew, in sooth a sure prodigy of evil.

Thereafter, for the span of seven days each time, the timid folk would emerge from their huts and sail forth to draw provender from the waves, naught filled their nets but unnatural malignancies. At length, and all aghast, they tarried not but fled swiftly to the uppermost rocks and thence to an inland village which lay hard by, wherein the greater number of them could find haven and refuge from these grisly marvels among their kin. There remained with Pharazyn only his two

servants, the boy Ratha and the crone Ahilidis, who had both witnessed many of his conjurations and were thus well inured to sights of magic. And with these two beside him, the prophet felt less alone against whatever the night would bring.

Reascending to his towering abode, he ignited before every portal such suffumigations as are singularly repulsive to the boreal demons; and at each angle of the house where a malign spirit might enter, he posted one of his familiars to guard against all intrusion. Thenceafter, while Ratha and Ahilidis slept, he studied with sedulous care the parchments of Pnom, wherein are collated many strong and potent exorcism. He bethought him that a dire spell had been laid upon the land of Zabdamar: an ensorcelling such as the wan polar demons might weave, or the chill witches of the moon might devise in their caverns of snow. And he deemed it well to retire for a time, lest the spell should now take effect upon others than the clammy denizens of the oozy-bottomed sea.

But albeit the exorcisms of Pnom were many and mighty, and stood strong against those entities sinister and malign, such as might yearn to work evil upon the life of Pharazyn, he derived little easement of heart from their perusal. For ever and anon, as he read again for his comfort the old rubrics, he remembered ominously the saying of the prophet Lith, which heretofore no man had ever understood: "There is One that inhabits the place of utter cold, and One that respireth where none other may draw breath. In the days to come He shall issue forth among the isles and cities of men, and shall bring with Him as a white doom the wind that slumbereth in his dwelling place."

And he remembered, as well, the grisly and horrific doom which had befallen his sorcerous colleague, the warlock Evagh, in Yikilth the ice- island. There, in the frozen realm of the worm Rlim Shaikorth, Evagh had suffered a metamorphosis so terrible that few savants have dared be specific in their redactions of the tale. But, Pharazyn and Evagh had been students of the same master, and following upon the demise or enchantment of the warlock, Pharazyn had been moved to interrogate the wandering spirits of wind and wave until at length he had learned in every dread particular that which had befallen his former comrade. And the portents which had presaged the coming of the white worm and the discarnation of Evagh were not unlike the omens and portents which Pharazyn had observed, and which he knew related to his own doom.

Therefore, he pored long over the exorcisms of Pnom and the prophecies of Lith, and peered as well into the doom-fraught pages of the Pnakotic Manuscripts, wherein there were of old indited much lore both abstruse and recondite, and otherwise forgotten among men.

* * *

Although a fire of fatty conifer blazed fiercely upon the marble hearth of his tower-top chamber, it seemed that a deathly chill began to pervade the air of the room about the midnight hour. As Pharazyn turned uneasily from the parchments of Pnom, and saw that the hearth was heaped high, and the fire burned bright, he heard the sudden turmoil of a great wind full of sea-birds eerily shrieking, and the cries of land-fowl driven on helpless wings, and over all a high laughter of diabolic voices. Madly from the north the wind beat upon his square-based towers; and birds were cast like blown leaves of autumn against the stout-paned windows; and devils seemed to tear and strain at the granite walls. Though the room's door was shut and the windows were tight-closed, an icy gust went round and round, circling the table where Pharazyn sat, snatching the broad parchments of Pnom from beneath his fingers, and plucking at the lamp-flame.

Fruitlessly, with sluggish brain, he strove to remember that counter-charm which is most effective against the spirits of the boreal quarter. Then, strangely, it seemed that the wind fell, leaving a mighty stillness about the house.

Soon he was made aware of a light shining beyond his chamber windows, as if a belated moon had now risen above the rocks. But Pharazyn knew that the moon was at that time a thin crescent, declining with eventide. It seemed that the light shone from the north, pale and frigid as fire of ice; and going to the window he beheld a great beam, that traversed all the sea, coming as if from the hidden pole. In that light the rocks were paler than marble, and the sands were whiter than sea-salt, and the huts of the fishermen were as white tombs. The walled garden of Pharazyn was filled with the piercing light, and lo! all of the green had departed from its foliage, and all of the color had been leached from its blossom until they were like deathly flowers of snow. And the beam fell bleakly the lower walls of his house, but left still in shadow the wall of that upper chamber from which he looked.

He thought that the beam poured from a pale cloud that lay athwart the sea-line, or else from a white peak in the direction of the pole, which had never before been visible by day, but seemed to have lifted skyward in the night -- of this he was uncertain. Watching, he thought he saw that it rose higher in the heavens, that beam of frigid light, but climb no higher upon the walls of his tower. At length the ice-mountain, wherefrom it seemed that ray of cold light shone, loomed mighty in the boreal heavens, until it was higher even than the dread mountain Achoravomas, which belches rivers of flame and liquid stone that pour unquenched through Tscho Vulpanomi to the austral main; nay steeper still it seemed to him, until it towered above the house of Pharazyn like unto far and fabulous Yarak itself, the mountain of ice that marks the site of the veritable pole.

Scarce could he draw breath in the cold that was on the air; and the light of the mountainous iceberg seared his eyeballs with an exceeding froreness. Yet he perceived an odd thing, that the rays of the glittering light from the pole fell indirectly and to either side of his house; and the lower chambers, where Ratha and Adilidis slept, were bathed in the strange luminance. It would seem that his suffumigations and other precautions had served to preserve at least this chamber of his house from the full fury of the beam of freezing light.

Then the beam swerved from the tall towers of Pharazyn, and passed his house by, questing the night. The chill gust was gone from the room; the lamp and the fire burned steadily; and something of warmth returned slowly into the half-frozen marrow of Pharazyn.

Pondering in vain the significance of the mystery, he then seemed to hear in the air about him a sweet and wizardly voice. And, speaking in a tongue that he knew not, the voice uttered a rune of slumber. And Pharazyn could not resist the rune and upon him there fell such numbness of sleep as overcomes the outworn watcher in a place of snow.

* * *

Wakingstiffly at dawn, he rose up from the floor where he had lain, and found himself alive and unharmed by the ordeal: it was as if all which had befallen him during the nocturnal hours had been naught but the phantasmagoria of a dream.

Striding to the window, the prophet threw wide the casement and gazed with fearful trepidation upon the north. But there was nothing which met his eye that he had not beheld a thousand dawns aforetime: the bleak and barren wastes of Mhu Thulan, cuhninating in a rocky promontory which thrust out into the dark sea; and the white wilderness of northernmost Polarion beyond the snowy bastions of the wall of mountains which stood athwart the horizon. Nowhere in his range of vision could Pharazyn perceive that wanly glittering, that sky-ascending spire, of soaring ice wherefrom had shone the frigid ray.

For all that it was no longer within the scope of his perception, the prophet knew with grim certainty what it had been that he had surely seen. No captain, faring far to sea, had espied its like in the boreal main; no legend had told of it among the dim hyperboreal isles; no seer or sage had recorded it from his seething and phantasmal visions: but Pharazyn knew.

Deathly and terrible had been that glittering pinnacle, hung like a djinn-reared tower in the zenith; and he knew with sure and certain knowledge the source of the light he had beheld in the darkness like a far beacon, and that it shone not from any earthly coast, but from remote and trans-telluric gulfs profound.

For the uncanny glitterings of a frost harder than diamonds sheathed the walls of his tower in unmeltable crystal. Yet the walls of the tower were no longer touched by the beam as in the night, for it has passed on many hours since; and upon all his house there was naught but the early sun and the morning shadows.

Again he remembered the saying of Lith; and with much foreboding he descended to the ground story. There, at the northern windows, the boy Ratha and the hag Ahilidis were leaning with faces upturned to the direction wherefrom the icy beacon-light had shone. Stiffly they stood, with wide-open eyes, and a pale terror was in their regard, and upon them was the white death such as has stricken his garden in the night. And, nearing them, the prophet was stayed by a terrible chillness that smote upon him from their bodies, which were pallid as the flesh of leprosy and white as moon-washed marble.

Gazing beyond them through the window, Pharazyn perceived along the sands and rocks of the shore, certain of the fisherfolk as had crept back to their homes were lying or standing upright in stiff, rigid postures, as if they had emerged from their hiding-places to behold the pale beam and had been struck into an enchanted slumber, or the turned to stone by the Gorgon's glare of the polar light. And the whole shore and harbor, and the cliffs, and the garden of Pharazyn, even to the front threshold of his house, was mailed in crystal armor of perdurable frost, as had been the walls of his house.

He would have fled from thence, knowing his magic wholly ineffectual against this thing. But it came to him that death was in the direct falling of the rays from the ice mountain, and, leaving the shelter of the house, he must perform enter that fatal light where next it shone questing down the darkling skies from the ultimate north. And yet not totally unprotected was he if he remained, for the wards he had erected against supernatural intrusion had in sooth protected him from the doom which had befallen the hapless fisher-folk, and the boy Ratha, and the crone. Or was his inexplicable survival due only to the efficacy of his suffumigations and familiars?

Now terror crept into the heart of Pharazyn, for it came to him that he alone, of all who dwelt on that shore, had been exempted from the white death. He dared not surmise the reason of his exemption; but he realized the futility of flight, and in the end he deemed it best to remain patiently and without fear, awaiting whatever should befall him with the coming of another night.

Returning to his chamber he busied himself with various conjurations. But his familiars had gone away in the night, forsaking the angles at which he had posted them; and no spirit, human or demoniacal, made reply to his querying. And not in any way known to wizards could he learn aught of the mountain of ice and of its frigid ray, or divine the least inkling of its secret, to confirm the dreadful surmise that had seized upon him.

Deeply immersed in his sorcerous labors, he was unaware of the passage of time and only realized that night was upon him when presently, as he labored with his useless cantrips, he felt upon his face the breathing of a wind that was not air but a subtler and a rarer element cold as the moon's ether. His own breath forsook him with agonies unspeakable, and he fell down on the floor in a sort of waking swoon that was near to death. And again he recalled the hideous metamorphosis that had befallen the unfortunate warlock, Evagh, and his transformation upon Yikilth into a being able to endure the rigors of super-Arctic cold, to whom even the frigid and insubstantial ether was rendered somehow respirable.

In the swoon he was doubtfully aware of voices uttering unfamiliar spells. Invisible fingers touched him with icy pangs; and about him came and went a bleak radiance, like a tide that flows and ebbs and flows again. Intolerable was this luminance to all his senses; but it brightened slowly, with briefer ebbings; and in time his eyes and his flesh were tempered to endure it. Almost fully upon him now shone the mysterious light from the north, blazing through his windows; and it seemed that a great Eye regarded him in the baleful light. He would have risen to confront the Eye, but his swoon held him like a palsy.

After that, he slept again for a certain period. Waking, he found in all his limbs their wonted strength, and quickness. The light was still upon his home, its pallid luminance glimmering through his chamber. Then, with inexplicable suddenness, it was gone, but whether it had died at its source or merely turned away to bathe some other place in the freezing regard of its Gorgon-eye, he did not know.

* * *

Morning lit the east and the second night was ended of this siege. And, peering out, he witnessed a new and more ominous marvel: for, lo! the adamantine frost had now crept nigh unto the very sill of his casement. And he was aware of a bleak certainty: that on the third night -- should he live to see it -- the cold and pallid beam from the icy peak would fully enter into his casement window, and his doom would be upon him everlastingly.

Terror seized upon Pharazyn then, for he saw in all of these phenomena the insidious workings of a wizardry plenipotent and transcendental, and beyond the skill of any terrene sorcerer. All that third day he searched the blood-writ runes of mouldering scrolls of pterodactyl-parchment, and scanned the writings of the elder sages, searching in vain for the means to combat the eerie menace from the pole which close-compassed him and which would, he knew, with the coming of night, drag him down to a doom so profound and unutterable that from its frigid bourn he might never escape.

For it had come to Tharazyn, in the trance-like chambers of his spell-induced swoon, what secret lurked behind the cryptic sayings of Lith. For he had found amongst the enigmatic utterances of the prophet yet a second passage whose meanings had heretofore eluded the comprehension of the sages: "But even He, who reigns among the lords of death, is made vulnerable by His coming-hence into the world of mortality. Beware, then, the wrath of that Other One which is His Master and far more terrible than He; and Who abideth forever in His cold caverns beneath His mountain, beprisoned there by the Elder Gods. For if that Other seek ye out, Him there is no escaping save in death itself."

Now it seemed to Pharazyn that the One whose coming was foretold by the prophet Lith was the white worm, Rlim Shaikorth; from beyond the limits of the north had he come in his floating citadel, the ice-island, Yikilth, to voyage the mundane oceans and to blast with a chill splendor the puny peoples of humankind. And when Evagh the warlock had been transformed into a being for whom was made respirable the air in which no mortal man may draw breath -- even that coldness and the thin ether that go everywhere with Yikilth -- he was brought face to face with that being whose advent the prophet Lith had foretold obscurely, and who had vaguely the lineaments of a visage belonging neither to beast of the earth nor ocean-creature.

And unto him Rlim Shaikorth had spake: Wisdom ineffable shalt be thine, and mastery of lore beyond the reach of mortals, if thou wilt but worship me and become my thrall; with me thou shalt voyage amid the kingdoms of the north, and shalt paw among the green southern islands, and we shall smite the fair ports and cities with a blight of trans-Arctic winter: for I am he whose coming even the gods may not oppose.

Thereafter, Pharazyn knew, Evagh had dwelt upon Yikilth, and beneath the instruction of Dooni and Ux Loddhan, captive sorcerers of Thulask, who had as well been tempered to the coldness of Yikilth, together with certain outlandish and uncouth men called Polarians, he performed the sevenfold rite that is scarce suitable for narration here, and swore the threefold vow of unspeakable alienation. Thereafter for many days and nights, he sailed with Rlim Shaikorth adown the coast of Mhu Thulan and the province of Zabdamar, the great iceberg being guided by the sorcery of the worm, prevailing even against the wind and tide. By night and day, like the beams of a deathly beacon, the chill splendor smote afar from Yikilth to freeze flowery Cerngoth and sea-affronting Aguil with boreal stillness. Proud triremes were overtaken as they fled southward, their crews blasted at the oars; and often ships were caught and embedded in the new bastions of ice that formed daily around the base of that ever-growing mountain. But, dwelling upon Yikilth, the sorcerer Evagh, and his fellow-wizards were immune to that icy death, even as the worm had promised them. All were united in the worship of the white worm; and all, it seemed, were content in a measure with their lot, and were fain of that unearthly lore and dominion which the worm had promised them.

But Evagh rebelled in secret against his thralldom to Rlim Shaikorth; he beheld with revulsion the doom of cities, and sorrow was in his heart for the fishing-coracles and the biremes of trade and warfare that floated manless after they had, met Yikilth. Ever the ice-isle followed its southwardly course, growing vaster and more prodigious by accretion; and ever, at the star-appointed time, which was the forenoon of every third day, the sorcerers convened in the presence of Rlim Shaikorth to do him worship. To the perturbation of all, their numbers unaccountably dwindled, warlock by warlock, first amongst the outlandish men from Polarion. And ever, ominously the worm greatened in size; and the increase was visible as a thickening of his whole body from head to tail.

Deeming these circumstances an ill augury, the sorcerers made fearful supplication to the worm in their various tongues, and implored him to enlighten them concerning the fate of their erstwhile fellows. But the reply they received was equivocal at best: sometimes the worm was silent, and sometimes he bespoke them, renewing vaguely the promises he had made. And Ux Loddhan, it seemed, was wholly oblivious to the doom which overtook them slowly, one by one, and was fain to impute an esoteric significance to the ever-growing bulk of the white worm and the vanishing of the wizards. At length Evagh had perceived that his vanished brethren were now merged wholly in the ultraterrestrial being of Rlim Shaikorth, had been devoured by the wan and loathly mouth of the worm and abode henceforward in the evil blackness of his belly, whereto he himself was doomed to dwell, if he did not foreswear his dreadful vows and strike during those infrequent periods of slumber when even the mighty Rlim Shaikorth was vulnerable. And strike he did, effecting the dissolution both of the white worm and of the ice-isle, Yikilth, itself; while his own spirit was borne shrieking into the boreal solitudes, there to bide forever.

Now it seemed to Pharazyn that the white worm was even that One whereof the prophet Lith had forewarned the world; and that if this was so, then even the terrible Rlim Shaikorth was but the emissary of another and far more potent and dreadful Being, whose wrath was a peril to all the world, as the prophet Lith had foretold.

In his perusal of the parchments of Pnom, Pharazyn had found certain vague references to an entity of supra-polar cold who had come down from dim Fomalhaut when the world was young, taking as his abode the icy and cavernous bowels of Yarak, the ice-mountain which stands upon the ultimate and boreal pole, bound there forever under the sigil of those eldermost and benign divinities which guard the world and are reputedly disposed to be friendly towards man. All of this seemed to agree with that against which the sayings of Lith had so cryptically warned. And in this the dread name of Aphoom Zhah, concerning whom even the Pnakotic Manuscripts dare only hint, took on a grim and frightful relevance.

For if that which Pharazyn now dared to dream was true, then Rlim Shaikorth was only the minister of that Polar One of whom the legends of anterior cycles whisper fearful things; and the white spirits of the boreal wastes -- the Cold Ones who obey the behests of the worm, and haunt perpetually the frozen wilderness, and shriek upon the nightwind Ike damned, tormented souls -- they were but the minions and servants of Aphoom Zhah, and Rlim Shaikorth their leader. And of this Aphoom Zhah, the Pnakotic Manuscripts allude to him as a flame of coldness which shall someday encompass the lands of men, from wintry Polarion in the ultimate north, through all the Hyperborean kingdoms and archipelagoes, even to the southmost isle of Oszhtor. And was it not a very flame of coldness which Pharazyn had seen falling adown the nighted skies, from a mountain of ice very like remote and terrible Yarak?

But wherefore was the wrath of the Dweller at the Pole turned against Pharazyn; or, if not from vengeance, for what ulterior purpose did the flame of coldness seek out his high house, night upon night? Here, too, the wisdom of Pnom yielded a clue upon perusal. For had not the sage written thusly: "Neither the Old Ones nor their minions. dare to disturb the sigil of the elder gods; the hand of mortal man alone may touch their sign unblasted;" and, in another place, "Power the star- born Ones possess over those hapless mortals in whose natal hour the star of Their origin be ascendant." And well knew Pharazyn that both he and the unhappy Evagh were birthed in the hour when dim Fomalhaut is risen over the edges of the world.

Therein lay the reason whereby had Rlim Shaikorth power to transmute the flesh of Evagh, and to temper it so that the warlock might endure the harsh rigor of Yikilth; therein, too, it might be, was the cause wherefore the light from the pole had sought out the tall towers of Pharazyn among all the residences of men. For only his hand could dislodge the stil the gods had set upon the portals of Yarak: only Pharazyn the prophet could loose the Cold Flame upon the world!

And thus it came to pass that Pharazyn knew the extremity of horror, and knew himself damned beyond all other dooms eternal: for it is a strange and fearful doom, to know that by your hand shall be set upon the flesh of men the seal of that gulf whose rigor paleth one by one the most ardent stars, and putteth rime at the very core of suns -- the unutterable coldness of the profound and cosmic deeps!

* * *

When that the sun rose upon the morning of the third day after the blight of coldness had first touched the coasts of Zabdamar, and the fisher-folk who had fled inland to abide the unseasonable chill in the village of Zuth came to return to their frost-whitened huts, they found the high house of Pharazyn the prophet empty of life.

At first they were timid and trepidatious, and fingered athwart the threshold; later, when naught betide, the younger and bolder men amongst them ventured into the house, but cautiously: for it is never prudent to enter the houses of sorcerers unbidden. In the lower parts of the house the young men found the bodies of the boy Ratha and the crone Ahilidis stark as bone; they gathered their courage and approached the pale corpses, finding them frozen and stony.

In the upper parts of the tower which were untouched by the glittering frost, the fisher-folk discovered the corpse of the prophet himself, seated in his throne-like chair carved of the ivory of mammoths. Upon his thin red lips was a cold smile, and there beneath was another smile, thinner and yet more red; for he had slit his throat from ear to ear, had Pharazyn, heedful of the less cryptic of the two sayings of the prophet Lith, that only by death can a man elude the clutches of Aphoom Zhah the Lord of the Pole.