

The Voyage of King Euvoran

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The crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned only from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. The magically graven gold of its circlet had been mined from a huge meteor that fell in the southern isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle from shore to shore with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of Earth, and was changeable in color from a flamelike red to the yellow of young moons. It was set with thirteen jewels, every one of which was unique and without fellow even in fable. These jewels were a wonder to behold, starring the circlet with strange unquiet fires and fulgurations terrible as the eyes of the cockatrice. But more wonderful than all else was the stuffed gazolba-bird which formed the superstructure of the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws above the wearer's brow, and towering royally with resplendent plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was the hue of burnished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in bezels of silver; and seven lacy, miniated quills arose from its ebon-dappled head, and a white tail fell down in a straightly spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle. The gazolba-bird was the last of its kind, according to the mariners who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east of Zothique. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim, and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, and a talisman inseparable from their royalty, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran the son of Karpoom, was the ninth wearer of the crown. Superbly and magnificently he had worn it for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamander's eggs. On all state occasions, levees and daily grantings of public audience and administerings of justice, it had graced the brow of the young king and had conferred upon him a dreadful majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the lamentable increase of an early baldness.

It came to pass, in the late autumn of the third year of his reign, that King Euvoran rose from a goodly breakfast of twelve courses and twelve wines, and went forth as was his custom to the hall of justice, which occupied an entire wing of his palace in the city of Aramoam, looking down in several-colored marble from its palmy hills to the rippled lazuli of the orient ocean.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most involute skeins of legality and crime, and was likewise ready for the meting of swift punishment to all malefactors. And beside him, at the right arm of his kraken-sculptured throne of ivory, there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head that was tempered to the hardness of iron. Full often, with this mace, the bones of the more flattery offenders were broken immediately, or their brains were split in the king's presence on a floor that was strewn with black sand. And beside the left arm of the throne, a professional torturer busied himself continually with the screws and pulleys of certain fearsome instruments of torture, as a warning of their fate to all evil-doers. And not always idle were the turnings of these screws and the tightenings of these pulleys, and not always empty were the metal beds of the machines.

Now, on that morning, the constables of the city brought before King Euvoran only a few petty thieves and suspicious vagrants; and there were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of the torture-instruments. So the king, who had looked forward to a pleasurable session, was somewhat balked and disappointed; and he questioned with much severity the minor culprits before him, trying to extort from each of them, in turn, an admission of some graver crime than that whereof he was accused. But it seemed that the pilferers were innocent of aught but pilfering; and the vagrants were guilty of naught worse than vagrancy; and Euvoran began to think that the morning would offer scant entertainment. For the bastinado was the heaviest punishment that he could legally impose on such misdemeanants.

"Away with these mackerel!" he roared to the officers, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. "Away with them, for they pollute my presence. Give each of them a hundred strokes with the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels. Then drive them forth from Aramoam toward the public refuse-grounds, and prod them with red-hot tridents if they linger in their crawling."

Then, ere the officers could obey him, there entered the hall of justice two belated constables, haling between them a peculiar and most unsavory individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks that were used in Aramoam for the apprehending of malefactors and suspects. And though the hooks were seemingly embedded

in his flesh as well as the filthy rags that served him for raiment, the prisoner bounded perpetually aloft in the manner of a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of tumblers. With a final volitation in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the incredible personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement, blinking rapidly, and was not prepossessed by the singular suppleness with which he louted to the very floor, upsetting the scarce-recovered equilibrium of the officers, and causing them to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

"Ha! What have we now?" said the king in an ominous voice.

"Sire, 'tis another vagabond," replied the breathless officers, when they had regained a more respectfully inclined position. "He would have passed through Aramoam by the main avenue in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the altitude of his saltations, if we had not arrested him."

"Such behavior is highly suspicious," growled Euvoran hopefully. "Prisoner, declare your name, your nativity and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which, beyond doubt, you are guilty."

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to regard Euvoran, the royal mace-wielder, and the royal torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree, his nose, ears and other features were all possessed of unnatural mobility, and he grimaced perpetually in a manner that caused his unclean beard to toss and curl like seaweed on a boiling whirlpool.

"I have many names," he replied, in an insolent voice whose pitch was peculiarly disagreeable to Euvoran, setting his teeth on edge like the grating of metal on glass. "As for my nativity and occupation, the knowledge of these, O king, would profit you little."

"Sirrah, you are malapert. Give answer or tongues of red-hot iron shall question you," roared Euvoran.

"Be it known to you, then, that I am a necromancer, and was born in the realm where the dawn and the sunset come together and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun."

"Ha! A necromancer!" snorted the king. "Know you not that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? Verily, we shall find means to dissuade you from the practice of such infamies."

At a sign from Euvoran, the officers drew their captive toward the instruments of torture. Much to their surprise, in view of his former ebullience, he allowed himself to be chained supinely on the iron bed that produced a remarkable elongation of the limbs of its occupants. The official engineer of these miracles began to work the levers, and the bed lengthened little by little with a surly grating, till it seemed that the prisoner's joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; and though, after a time, he had gained more than a half-cubit from the stretching, he appeared to experience no discomfort whatever; and to the stupefaction of all present, it became plain that the elasticity of his arms, legs and body was beyond the extensibility of the rack itself; for the latter was now drawn to its limits.

All were silent, viewing this prodigy; and Euvoran rose from his seat and went over to the rack, as if doubtful of his own eyes that testified to a thing so enormous. And the prisoner said to him:

"It were well to release me, O King Euvoran."

"Say you so?" the king cried out in a rage. "However, it is not thus that we deal with felons in Ustaim." And he made a private sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, rearing his massive, leaden-headed mace aloft.

"On your own head be it," said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the iron bed, breaking the bonds that held him, as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a terrible height, which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger, dark and sere as that of a mummy, at the king's crown; and simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of migrant fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night. And lo! As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head and the king felt that his brow was lightened by the crown's goodly and well-accustomed weight. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all who were present, beheld above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been slain more than two hundred years before by sea-faring men in a remote isle. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread as if for flight,

and it carried still in its steely claws the rare circlet of the crown. Librating, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in wordless awe and consternation. Then, with metallic whirring, its white tail deployed like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open portals, and passed seaward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it, with great bounds and goatish leapings, the necromancer followed; and no man tried to deter him. But those who saw him depart from the city swore that he went north along the ocean-strand, while the bird flew directly eastward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. Thereafter, as if he had gone at a single bound into alien realms, the necromancer was not seen in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley from Sotar, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-main, a several-colored glory still flying toward the sources of the dayspring. And they said that the crown of changeable gold, with its thirteen fellowless gems, was still carried by the bird. And though they had trafficked long in the archipelagoes of wonder, and had seen many prodigies, they deemed this thing a most rare and unexampled portent.

King Euvoran, so strangely reft of that avian head-gear, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants in the hall of justice, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. If the sun had turned black in heaven, or his palace walls had crumbled about him, his dumbfoundment would hardly have been more excessive. For it seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem and the talisman of his fathers. And, moreover, the thing was wholly against nature, and the laws of god and man were annulled thereby: since never before, in all history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity, and Euvoran, having donned a voluminous turban of purple samite, held council with the sagest ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than the king: for the bird and the circlet were both irreplaceable. And in the meanwhile, the rumor of this misfortune was borne abroad through Ustaim, and the land became filled with lamentable doubt and confusion, and some of the people began to murmur covertly against Euvoran, saying that no man could be the rightful ruler of that country without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in a time of national exigence, Eurovan repaired to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, who was a terrestrial god and the chief deity of Aramoam. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet, as was ordained by hierarchal law, he entered the dim adytum where the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and wrought of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and regarded the motes in a narrow beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. And, falling prone in the dust that had gathered around the idol through ages, the king gave homage to Geol, and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. And after an interim, a voice issued from the god's navel, as if a subterrene rumbling had become articulate. And the voice said to King Eurovan:

"Go forth and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie beneath the orient sun. There, O king, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty; and there, with thine own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran was much comforted by this oracle, since the utterances of the god were deemed infallible. And it seemed to him that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim, which had the reanimated bird for its superstructure. So, returning to the royal palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest argosies of war, which lay then at anchor in the tranquil harbor of Aramoam, and ordered them to make immediate provision for a long voyage into the east and among the archipelagoes of morning.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship of the fleet, which was a towering quadrireme with oars of beef-wood and sails of stout woven byssus dyed in yellowish scarlet, and a long gonfalon at the mast head, bearing the gazolba bird in its natural colors on a field of heavenly cobalt. The rowers and sailors of the quadrireme were mighty Negroes from the north; and the soldiers who manned it were fierce mercenaries from Xylac in the west; and with him, going aboard, the king took certain of his concubines and jesters and other ministrants, as well as an ample store of liquors and rare viands, so that he should lack for nothing during the voyage. And mindful of the prophecy of Geol, the king armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with parrot-feathered arrows; and he also carried a sling of lion-leather and a blowgun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage; for a wind blew strongly from the west on the morning of the departure; and the fleet, which numbered fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the sea-risen sun. And the farewell clamors and shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and the marble houses of Aramoam on its four palmy hills here drowned in that swiftly foundering bank of azure which was the shoreline of

Ustaim. And, thereafter, for many days, the iron-wood beaks of the galleys clove a softly weltering sea of indigo that rose unbroken on all sides to a cloudless, dark-blue heaven.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, that earthen god who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his wont; and reclining beneath a saffron canopy on the poop of the quadrireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace-vaults, storing the warmth of elder, ardent suns whereon oblivion's black rime was fallen. And he laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, at unquenchable ancient bawdries that had won the laughter of other kings in the sea-lost continents of yore. And his women diverted him with harlotries that were older than Rome or Atlantis. And ever he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons wherewith he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba-bird, according to the oracle of Geol.

The winds were unfailing and auspicious, and the fleet sped onward, with the great black oarsmen singing gaily at their oars, and the gorgeous sailcloths flapping loudly, and the long banners floating on the air like straight-blown flames. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coasts of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred leagues from north to south; and in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer of that isle, named Iffibos, had drawn it down through his sorcery and had closed it in a cage of sandalwood. So the king landed in Loithe, deeming his quest perhaps already nigh to its end, and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who dwelt in a retired vale among the mountains at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey, and Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, which were no respecters of royalty, and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. And when, after some delay and divagation in the deep jungle, he came to the house of Iffibos on a high, precarious crag, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to the region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. So the king returned to Loithe, after declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. And in Loithe the king tarried no longer than was needful for the laying aboard of fifty jars of the sovereign arrack in which Sotar excels all other lands.

Then, coasting the southern cliffs and promontories, where the sea bellowed prodigiously in mile-deep caverns, the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar, and Tosk, whose people were more akin to apes and lemurs than to men. And Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba, and received only a chattering as of apes in answer. So the king ordered his men-at-arms to catch a number of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. And the men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day among the trees and boulders in which the isle abounded, but without catching a single one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying several of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him and sailed on to the seven atolls of Yumatot, whose inhabitants were mostly cannibals. And beyond Yumatot, which was the usual limit of eastern voyaging from Ustaim, the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea, and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story.

It were tedious to relate the full particulars of that voyage, in which Euvoran and his captains went ever toward the sources of the dawn. Various and without number were the strange marvels they found in the archipelagoes beyond Yumatot; but nowhere could they find a single feather such as had formed part of the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

Howbeit, the king beheld many a flock of unknown, fiery-winged fowl that went over the galleys in mid-sea, passing between the unmarked islets. And, landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyrebirds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun. And he chased the dodo and dinornis on shores that were otherwise unpeopled. And once, in a sea of high-beetling barren rocks, the fleet was assailed by mighty griffins that flew down from their crag-built eyries, with wings shining like feathery brass under the meridian sun, and making a harsh clangor as of shields shaken in battle. And the griffins, being both ferocious and pertinacious, were driven away with much difficulty by boulders hurled from the catapults of the vessels.

Everywhere, as the ships drove eastward, there were multitudes of fowl. But at the sunset of a day in the fourth moon following their departure from Aramoam, the vessels approached a nameless isle that towered mile-high with cliffs of black, naked basalt, around whose base the sea cried with baffled anger, and about whose precipices there were no wings nor voices of birds. The isle was topped with gnarly cypresses that might have grown in a windy graveyard; and sullenly it took the afterglow, as if drenched with a gore of darkening blood. Far up in the cliffs there were strange columned eaves like the dwellings of forgotten troglodytes, but seemingly inaccessible to men; and the caves to all appearances were unoccupied by any kind of life, though pitting the face of the isle for leagues. And Euvoran ordered his captains to

drop anchor, meaning to search for a landing-place on the morrow: since, in his anxiety to retrieve the gazolba, he would pass no isle of the dawnward main, not even the unlikeliest, without due inquiry and examination.

Quickly fell the darkness, without moon, till the close-anchored ships were visible to each other only by their lanterns. And Euvoran sat at supper in his cabin, sipping the golden arrack of Sotar between mouthfuls of mango-jelly and phenicopter's meat. And, saving a small watch on each of the vessels, the sailors and men-at-arms were all at evening mess; and the rowers ate their figs and lentils in the oar-decks. Then, from the watches, there was a wild shouting of alarm, and the shouting ceased in a moment, and each of the vessels rocked and sagged in the water, as if a monstrous weight had settled upon it. No man knew the thing that had happened, but everywhere there was turmoil and confusion, some saying that the fleet was attacked by pirates. Those who peered from the ports and oar-holes saw that the lanterns of their neighbors had been quenched, and perceived a milling and seething as of low-driven clouds in the darkness, and saw that foul black creatures, large as men and winged like oupires, were clinging to the ranged oars in myriads. And those who dared to approach the open hatches found that the decks, the rigging and the masts were crowded with similar creatures, who, it seemed, were of nocturnal habit and had come down in the manner of bats from their caves in the island.

Then, like things of nightmare, the monsters began to invade the hatches and assail the ports, clawing with hellish talons at the men who opposed them. And, being somewhat hampered by their wings, they were driven back with spears and arrows, but returned again and again in a thickening press without number, cheeping with a faint and bat-like sound. It was plain that they were vampires, for whenever they had dragged a man down, as many of them as could gain mouthhold would fasten on him incontinently, and suck his blood till little more remained than a skinful of bones. The upper oar-decks, being half open to the sky, were quickly usurped, and their crews overcome with a hideous swarming; and the rowers in the orlops cried that the sea-water was pouring in through the oar-holes as the ships sank deeper beneath an ever-gathering weight.

All night, at the ports and hatches, the men of Euvoran fought the vampires, taking turns in shifts when they wearied. Many of them were seized and their blood sucked before the eyes of their fellows as the night wore on; and the vampires, it seemed, were not to be slain by mortal weapons, though the blood they had gorged came forth in spouting rills from their wounded bodies. And thicklier they clustered upon the fleet, till the biremes began to founder, and the rowers were drowned in the sunken lower decks of certain triremes and quadriremes.

King Euvoran was wroth at this unseemly turmoil that had interrupted his supper; and when the golden arrack was spilt and the dishes of rare meat were emptied on the floor by the vessel's violent rocking, he would have issued from his cabin, fully armed, to try conclusions with these picaular miscreants. But, even as he turned to fling wide the cabin-door, there was a soft infernal pittering at the port-holes behind him; and the women who were with him began to shriek, and the fools cried out in terror. And the king saw in the lamplight a grisly face with the teeth and nostrils of a flittermouse, that leaned in through one of the cabin-ports. He sought to repel the face, and thereafter, till dawn, he fought the vampires with those very weapons he had designed for the slaying of the gazolba; and the ship's captain, who was with him at supper, guarded a second port with his claymore; and the others were held by two of the king's eunuchs, armed with scimitars. In this warfare they were favored by the smallness of the ports, which could hardly in any case have allowed the free passage of their winged assailants. And, after lightless hours of tedious, horrid struggle, the darkness became thinned with brown twilight, and the vampires lifted from the vessels in a black cloud and returned to their caves in the mile-high cliffs of that unnamed island.

Heavy was the heart of Euvoran within him when he surveyed the damage done to his proud argosies of war: for, among the fifteen vessels, seven had sunk in the night, borne under and swamped by those obscenely clinging hordes of oupires; and the decks of the others were bloody as abbatoirs; and half of the sailors and rowers and men-at-arms were lying flat and flaccid as empty wineskins after the greedy drinking of the great bats. And the sails and banners were shredded into rags; and everywhere, from beak to rudder of Euvoran's galleys, there was the stain and reek of a Stymphalian foulness. So, lest another eve should find them within wing-shot of that accursed isle, the king ordered his remaining captains to weigh anchor; and the other ships, with sea-water still awash in their orlops, and some with drowned rowers still at the oars of their nether banks, drew slowly and heavily to eastward, till the pitted walls of the isle began to sink beneath the main. At eve there was no land in sight anywhere; and after two days, still unharried by the vampires, they came to a coral island, low in the wave, with a calm lagoon that was haunted only by ocean-fowl. And there, for the first time, Euvoran paused to repair his tattered sails, and pump the sea from his holds, and clean the blood and vileness from his decks.

However, in spite of this disaster, the king abated not in any degree his purpose, to sail ever on toward the fountains of the day, until, as Geol had predicted, he should come again on the flown gazolba and slay it with his own royal hand. So, for another moon, they passed amid other and stranger archipelagoes, and penetrated deeper into the regions of myth and story.

Bravely they drove into mornings of amaranth crossed by gilded lories, and noontides of darkly ardent sapphire where the rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien-figured Signs they heard the wild, melancholy crying of swans that flew southward fleeing the winter of realms indiscoverable, and seeking the summer in trackless worlds. And they held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the ell-wide pennons of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them; and men who arrayed themselves in apyornis plumes. And they spoke also with antic people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of a new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers. But nowhere could they learn aught of the gazolba.

At mid-forenoon, early in the sixth month of the voyage, a new and unheard-of shore ascended from the deep, curving for many miles, from northeast to southwest, with sheltered harbors, and cliffs and pinnacled crags that were interspaced with low-lying verdurous dales. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran and his captains saw that towers were builded on certain of the highmost crags; but in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass. And, sailing still nearer, and entering the harbor, they descried no evident sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds, ranging in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wingspread than eagle or condor. They circled the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary; and Euvoran saw that a winged concourse, as it were, went to and fro above the woods and about the cliffs and towers. He bethought him that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba; so, arming himself for the chase, he went ashore in a small boat with several of his men.

The birds, even the largest, were patently timid and inoffensive; for when the king landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland, or sought the crags and pinnacles that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and Euvoran marvelled at such cunning; and moreover he was somewhat exasperated, for he wished not to depart without bringing down a trophy of his skill, even though he should fail to find the gazolba itself. And he deemed the behavior of the birds all the more curious because of the island's solitude: for here there were no paths other than would be made by forest animals; and the woods and meadows were wholly wild and incult; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their empty windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods along the shore, and came to a steep slope of bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower at one side. Here, at the slope's bottom, Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if wholly unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. And Euvoran trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry. And he was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of the men who accompanied him cried out as if in alarm. Then, turning his head as he stooped beneath the foliage of the cedar, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet descried on that isle, who came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him with the drumming of their mighty vans, and beating him instantly to the ground, so that he was aware of them only as a storm of dreadfully rushing plumes and a hurlyburly of cruel beaks and talons. And, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the birds fastened its huge claws in the shoulder-cape of the king's mantle, not sparing the flesh beneath in its fell clutch, and carried him away to the tower on the crag as easily as a ger-falcon would have carried a small leveret. The king was wholly helpless, and he had dropped his longbow beneath the onset of the birds, and his blowgun had been shaken loose from the girdle at which it depended, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. And he had no weapon remaining, other than a sharp misericordia; and this he could not use to any purpose against his captor in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if with derision till he was deafened by their din. And a sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried and the violence of his ascent; and giddily he saw the walls of the tower sink past him with wide and portal-like windows. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a high and spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face and lay vomiting for awhile, heedless of his surroundings. Then, recovering somewhat, he raised himself to a sitting position, and beheld before him, above a sort of dais, an enormous perch of red gold and yellow ivory wrought in the form of a new crescent arching upward. The perch was supported between posts of black jasper flecked as if with blood, and upon it there sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran with a grim and dreadful and austere mien, as an emperor might eye the gutter-scum that his guards have haled before him for some obscene offense. The plumage of the bird was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a mighty pick-ax of pale bronze that darkened greenly toward the point, and he clutched the perch with iron talons that were longer than the mailed fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with quills of turquoise blue and amber yellow, like many a pointed crown; and about his long, unfeathered throat, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads, and the heads of various ferine beasts such as the weasel, the wildcat, the stoat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no larger than groundnuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl; and his alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other birds of a size inferior only to his were sitting about the chamber on less costly and less elevated perches, even as grandees of the realm might sit in the presence of their sovereign. And behind Euvoran, like guards, there stood together with its fellow the creatures that had rapt him to the tower.

Now, adding to his utter confounding, the great Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech. And the bird said to him in a harsh but magniloquent and majestic voice:

"Too hardily, O filth of mankind, thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds, and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For know that I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim on this terraqueous globe of Earth; and in Ornava is my seat and my capital. Verily, justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defence, I will give thee hearing now, for I would not that even the vilest of earthly vermin, and the most pernicious, should accuse me of inequity or tyranny."

Then, blustering somewhat, though sorely afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer to the bird, and said:

"I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me together with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. And know that I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow me to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species."

Thereat the ruler of the birds, as if amazed and more indignant than before, made question of Euvoran and interrogated him sharply concerning the gazolba. And, learning that this bird had been slain by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the whole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried in a great and wrathful voice:

"This helpeth not thy case but showeth the guilty of a twofold and a triple infamy: for thou hast owned a most abominable thing and one that subverteth nature. In this my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but truly, it is not allowable nor sufferable that man should do thus to birds. So, for the sake of justice and retribution, I shall presently commit thee to one of my taxidermists. Indeed, methinks that a stuffed king (since even the vermin have kings) will serve to enhance my collection."

After that, he addressed Euvoran's guards and enjoined them: "Awat with this vileness. Confine it to the man-cage, and maintain a strict watch before it."

Euvoran, urged and directed by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sort of sloping ladder with broad rungs of teak, that led from the chamber to one above it in the tower's top. In the center of this room there was a bamboo cage of capacity more than ample for the housing of six men. The king was driven into the cage, and the birds bolted the door upon him with their claws, which seemed to have the deftness of fingers. Thereafter one of them remained by the cage, eyeing Euvoran vigilantly through the spaces of the bars; and the other flew away through a great window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, since the cage contained no better provision for his comfort. Despair was heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. And sorely was he astonished, that a bird should speak with human speech, insulting and reviling humankind; and he deemed it an equally monstrous thing that a bird should dwell in royal state, with servitors to do his will, and the pomp and power of a king. And, pondering these unholy prodigies, Euvoran waited for his doom in the man-cage; and after awhile, water and raw grain were brought to

him in earthen vessels; but he could not eat the grain. And still later, as the day drew toward afternoon, he heard a shouting of men and a shrieking of birds below the tower; and above these noises, anon, there were clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. So Euvoran knew that his sailors and soldiers, having seen him borne into captivity in the tower, were assailing the place in an effort to succor him. And the noises waxed, mounting to a most tremendous and atrocious din, and there were cries as of people mortally wounded, and a vengeful shrilling as of harpies in battle. Then, presently, the clamor ebbed away, and the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower. And hope waned within him, dying in a darker murk of despair.

So the afternoon went over, declining seaward, and the sun touched Euvoran with its level beams through a western window and colored the bars of his cage with a mockery of gold. Presently, the light flowed from the room, and after awhile the twilight rose, weaving a tremulous phantom web of the pale air. And between the sunset and the darkness, a night-guard came in to relieve the day-flying owl who warded the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes, and he stood taller than Euvoran himself, and was formed and feathered somewhat in the burly fashion of an owl, and he had the stout legs of a megapode. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, which burned upon him with a brighter bale as the dusk deepened. Hardly could he sustain that ever vigilant scrutiny. But anon the moon rose, being but little past the full, and poured a spectral quicksilver into the room, and paled the eyes of the bird; and Euvoran conceived a desperate plan.

His captors, deeming all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the misericordia, which was long and double-edged and needle-sharp at the tip. And stealthily he gripped the hilt of his misericordia under his mantle, and feigned a sudden illness with groanings and tossings and convulsions that threw him against the bars. And, even as he had schemed, the great nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owl-like head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, pretending a more violent convulsion, drew the misericordia from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

Shrewdly the thrust went home, piercing the deepest veins, and the squawking of the bird was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so that Euvoran feared that all the occupants of the tower would be awakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were bootless; for none came to the chamber; and soon the flappings ceased, and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers. Thereupon the king proceeded with his plan, and shot back the bolts of the wide-latticed bamboo door with small difficulty. Then, going to the head of the teak-wood ladder which ran to the room beneath, he looked down and beheld the ruler of the birds asleep in the moonlight on his chryselephantine perch, with his terrible pick-ax beak under his wing. And Euvoran was afraid to descend into the chamber, lest the ruler should awake and see him. And also, it occurred to him that the lower stories of the tower might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had slain.

Again his despair returned upon him; but being of a sleightful and crafty bent, Euvoran bethought him of another scheme. With much labor, using the misericordia, he skinned the mighty nyctalops, and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then Euvoran wrapped himself in the skin, with the head of the nyctalops rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amidst the feathers. And the skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and his potbelly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the heavy shanks of the bird as he walked.

Then, imitating the gait and carriage of this fowl, the king descended the ladder, treading cautiously to avoid a fall and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. And the ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In the next room there were many great birds asleep on perches, and the king was nigh to perishing with terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him. And he went down into a third room, and was startled to see therein the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clad like merchants, and others nude and ruddled with bright ores like savages. And the men were still and stark as if enchanted; and the king feared them little less than he had feared the birds. But remembering that which the ruler had told him, he divined that these were persons who had been captured even as he himself, and had been slain by the birds and preserved through the art of an avian taxidermy. And, trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of birdkind. And the room below this was the ground story of the tower, and its windows and portals by several gigantic night-fowl similar to those whose skin was worn by the king. Here, indeed, was his greatest peril and the supreme trial of his courage; for the birds eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs, and they greeted him with a soft whoo-whooping as of owls. And

the knees of Euvoran knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but, imitating the sound in reply, he passed among the guards and was not molested by them. And, reaching an open portal of the tower, he saw the moonlight rock of the crag lying at a distance of no more than two cubits below him; and he hopped from the doorsill in the manner of a fowl, and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge along the crag, till he reached the upper beginning of that declivity at whose bottom he had slain the little owl. Here his descent was easier, and he came anon to the woods around the harbor.

But, ere he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows about him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows, and he roared out in anger, and dropped the mantling birdskin. Thereby, no doubt, he was saved from death at the hands of his own men, who were coming through the woods with intent to assail the tower at night. And, learning this, the king forgave the jeopardy in which their arrows had placed him. But he thought it best to refrain from attacking the tower, and to quit the isle with all dispatch. So returning to his flagship, he ordered all his captains to set sail immediately; for, knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was more than apprehensive of pursuit; and he deemed it well to place a wide interval of sea between his vessels and that isle ere dawn. So the galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a northeastern promontory, they went due east in a course contrary to the moon. And, Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, regaled himself with a variety and plenitude of viands to make up for his fasting in the man-cage; and he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and added thereto a jarful of the puissant pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway betwixt midnight and morn, when the isle of Ornava was left far behind, the steersmen of the vessels beheld a wall of ebon cloud that rose swiftly athwart the heavens, spreading and toppling in towers of thunder, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on as if with the loosed hurricanes of hell through a welter of unstarred chaos. The ships were sundered in the gloom and were borne far apart; and at daybreak the king's quadrireme was alone in a prone-rushing tumult of mingled wave and cloud; and the mast was shattered, along with most of the beef-wood oars; and the vessel was a toy for the demons of the tempest.

For three days and nights, with no glimmer of sun or star discerned through the ever-boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract of elements pouring to some bottomless gulf beyond the fringes of the world. And early on the fourth day the clouds were somewhat riven; but a wind still blew like the breath of perdition. Then, lifting darkly through the spray and vapor, a half-seen land arose before the prow, and the helmsman and the rowers were wholly helpless to turn the doomed ship from its course. And shortly after, with a great crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, the vessel struck on a low reef hidden by the flying foam, and its lower decks were flooded quickly. And the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and the water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Gaunt and cragged and austere was the shore beyond the reef, beheld only through the veils of the sea's foaming fury. And scant, it seemed, was the hope of reaching land. But, ere the wrecked argosy had gone beneath him, Euvoran lashed himself with ropes of coir to an empty wine-barrel, and cast himself from the sloping deck. And those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard by the typhoon, leapt after him into that high wallowing sea, some trusting only to their might as swimmers and others clinging to casks or broken spars or planks. And most were drawn under in the seething maelstroms or were beaten to death on the rocks; and of all the ship's company, the king alone survived and was cast ashore with the breath of life unquenched within him by the bitter sea.

Half-drowned and senseless, he lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence, and the billows came in with falling crests, and the clouds went over in a rack of pearl, and the sun, climbing above the rock, shone down upon Euvoran from a deep immaculate azure. And the king, still dazed from the buffeting rudeness of the sea, heard dimly and as if in a dream the shrilling of an unknown bird. Then, opening his eyes, he beheld betwixt himself and the sun, librating on spread wings, that various-colored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice that was harsh and shrill as that of the peafowl, the bird hung above him for a moment, and then flew inland through a rift among the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys of war, the king unbound himself in haste from the empty barrel; and, rising giddily, he followed the bird. And, though he was now weaponless, it seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a great cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the high and rugged crags, he found a sheltered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and woods of exotic leaf, and fragrant orient shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers of fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba; and among them he was unable to distinguish the one he had followed, deeming it the avian garniture of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was a thing beyond his

comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed fowl unique and fellowless throughout the world, even as the other components of the crown of Ustaim. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the mariners who had slain the birds in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of its kind.

However, though wrath and confusion were in his heart, Euvoran bethought him that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem and the talisman of his royalty in Ustaim, and would vindicate his quest among the isles of dawn. So, with a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. And ever before him as he chased them, the birds flew from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking, and a flurry of plumes that wrought an imperial splendor on the air. And at length, by his own good aim or the cast of chance, Euvoran slew him a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered raiment of an uncouth cut, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with tough grass. And the man wore in lieu of other headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his matted beard; and the king beheld him with surprise and anger, and cried loudly:

"Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold you to a dire accounting of these deeds."

At this, eyeing Euvoran strangely, the man laughed a long and derisive laugh, as if he deemed the king a person somewhat addled in his wits. And he seemed to find much merriment in the aspect of the king, whose garments were draggled and were stiff and stained with the drying sea-water, and whose turban had been snatched away by the felon waves, leaving his baldness without disguise. And when he had done laughing, the man said:

"Verily, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. For nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle, being a sea-captain from the far southwestern land of Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship's company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no other man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes, and has no people other than the birds. And as for your questions, they are readily answered: I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of famine, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance, apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because my tarboosh was stolen by the sea whenas it flung me rudely upon this strand. And I wot not of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover, your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless, and you and I are alone thereon, and I am the stronger of us twain and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran; and since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl: for I must deem that you are more familiar with the products of the culinary art than with the practice."

Now, hearing all this, the wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in the true oracle of Geol. And he knew that the wreckage of his fleet of war was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor live in pleasant luxury, nor administer the dooms of law between the torturer and the executioner in the hall of justice, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. So, not being utterly bereftreason, he bowed him to his destiny.

And he said to the sea-captain, "There is sense in what you say. Therefore lead on."

Then, laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and the captain, whose name was Naz Obbamar, repaired companionably to a cave in the rocky hill-slope of the isle's interior, which Naz Obbamar had chosen for his abode. Here the captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs, and showed the king the proper manner in which to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood. And Euvoran, being famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. And after they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing a wine he had made from certain berries; and he and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns, and told each other the tale of their adventures, and forgot for a while the rudeness and desolation of their plight.

Thereafter they shared the isle of gazolbas, killing and eating the birds as their hunger ordained. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they slew and ate some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made him a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolba, even as Naz Obbamar had done. And this was the fashion of their days till the end.