

## The White Sybil

Clark Ashton Smith

TORTHA, the poet, with strange austral songs in his heart, and the umber of high and heavy suns on his face, had come back to his native city of Cerngoth, in Mhu Thulan, by the Hyperborean sea. Far had he wandered in the quest of that alien beauty which had fled always before him like the horizon. Beyond Commoriom of the white, numberless spires, and beyond the marsh-grown jungles to the south of Commoriom, he had floated on nameless rivers, and had crossed the half-legendary realm of Tscho Vulpanomi, upon whose diamond-sanded, ruby-graveled shore an ignescent ocean was said to beat forever with fiery spume.

He had beheld many marvels, and things incredible to relate: the uncouthly carven gods of the South, to whom blood was spilt on sun-approaching towers; the plumes of the huusim, which were many yards in length and were colored like pure flame; the mailed monsters of the austral swamps; the proud argosies of Mu and Antillia, which moved by enchantment, without oar or sail; the fuming peaks that were shaken perpetually by the struggles of imprisoned demons. But, walking at noon on the streets of Cerngoth, he met a stranger marvel than these. Idly, with no expectation of other than homely things, he beheld the White Sybil of Polarion.

He knew not whence she had come, but suddenly she was before him in the throng. Amid the tawny girls of Cerngoth with their russet hair and blue-black eyes, she was like an apparition descended from the moon. Goddess, ghost or woman, he knew not which, she passed fleetly and was gone: a creature of snow and norland light, with eyes like moon-pervaded pools, and lips that were smitten with the same pallor as the brow and bosom. Her gown was of some filmy white fabric, pure and ethereal as her person.

In wonder that turned to startled rapture, Tortha gazed at the miraculous being, and sustained for a moment the strangely thrilling light of her chill eyes, in which he seemed to find an obscure recognition, such as a long-veiled divinity, appearing at last, would vouchsafe to her worshipper.

Somehow, she seemed to bring with her the infrangible solitude of remote places, the death-deep hush of lonely plateaus and mountains. A silence, such as might dwell in some abandoned city, fell on the chaffering, chattering crowd as she went by; and the people drew back from her in sudden awe. Before the silence could break into gossiping murmurs, Tortha had guessed her identity.

He knew that he had seen the White Sybil, that mysterious being who was rumored to come and go as if by some preterhuman agency in the cities of Hyperborea. No man had ever learned her name, or her nativity; but she was said to descend like a spirit from the bleak mountains to the north of Cerngoth; from the desert land of Polarion, where the oncoming glaciers crept in valleys that had once been fertile with fern and cycad, and passes that had been the highways of busy traffic.

No one had ever dared to accost or follow her. Often she came and went in silence; but sometimes, in the marts or public squares, she would utter cryptic prophecies and tidings of doom. In many places, throughout Mhu Thulan and central Hyperborea, she had foretold the enormous sheet of ice, now crawling gradually downward from the pole, that would cover the continent in ages to come, and would bury beneath oblivious drift the mammoth palms of its jungles and the superb pinnacles of its cities. And in great Commoriom, then the capital, she had prophecied a stranger doom that was to befall this city long before the encroachment of the ice. Men feared her everywhere, as a messenger of unknown outland gods, moving abroad in supernal bale and beauty.

All this, Tortha had heard many times; and he had wondered somewhat at the tale, but had soon dismissed it from his mind, being laden with marvelous memories of exotic things. But now that he had seen the Sybil, it was as if an unexpected revelation had been offered to him; as if he had discerned, briefly and afar, the hidden goal of a mystic pilgrimage.

In that single glimpse, he had found the personification of all the vague ideals and unfixed longings that had drawn him from land to land. Here was the eluding strangeness he had sought on alien breasts and waters, and beyond horizons of fire-vomiting mountains. Here was the veiled Star, whose name and luster he had never known. The moon-cold eyes of the Sybil had kindled a strange love in Tortha, to whom love had been, at most, no more than a passing agitation of the senses.

However, on that occasion, it did not occur to him that he might follow the visitant or come to learn more concerning her. Momentarily, he was content with the rare vision that had fired his soul and dazzled his senses. Dreaming such dreams as the moon might inspire in a moth; dreams through which the Sybil moved like a woman-shaped flame on ways too far and too steep for human feet, he returned to his house in Cerngoth.

The days that ensued were dim and dream-like to Tortha, and were presided over by his memory of the white apparition. A mad Uranian fever mounted in his soul, together with the sure knowledge that he sought an impossible fruition. Idly, to beguile the hours, he copied the poems he had written during his journey, or turned over the pages of boyish manuscripts. All were equally void and without meaning now, like the sere leaves of a bygone year.

With no prompting on the part of Tortha, his servants and visitors spoke to him of the Sybil. Seldom, they said, had she entered Cerngoth, appearing more often in cities remote from the ice-bound waste of Polarion. Truly, she was no mortal being, for she had been seen on the same day in places hundreds of miles apart. Huntsmen had sometimes met her on the mountains above Cerngoth; but always, when encountered thus, she had disappeared quickly, like a morning vapor that melts among the crags.

The poet, listening with a moody and absent mien, spoke of his love to no one. He knew well that his kinsfolk and acquaintances would think this passion a more errant madness than the youthful yearning that had led him to unheard-of lands. No human lover had aspired to the Sybil, whose beauty was a perilous brightness, akin to meteor and fireball; a fatal and lethal beauty, born of transarctic gulfs, and somehow one with the far doom of worlds.

Like the brand of frost or flame, her memory burned in Tortha. Musing among his neglected books, or walking abroad in reverie on which no outward thing could intrude, he saw always before him the pale radiance of the Sybil. He seemed to hear a whisper from boreal solitudes: a murmur of ethereal sweetness, sharp as ice-born air, vocal with high, unearthly words, that sang of inviolate horizons and the chill glory of lunar auroras above continents impregnable to man.

The long summer days went by, bringing the outland folk to trade their furs and eider in Cerngoth, and damaskeening the slopes beyond the city with flowers of bright azure and vermilion. But the Sybil was not seen again in Cerngoth, nor was she heard of in other cities. It seemed as if her visitations had ceased; as if, having delivered the tidings committed to her by the outer gods, she would appear no more in the haunts of mankind.

Amid the despair that was twin to his passion, Tortha had nurtured a hope that he might again behold the visitant. Slowly the hope grew fainter; but left his longing undiminished. In his daily walks he now went farther afield, leaving the houses and streets and turning toward the mountains that glowered above Cerngoth, guarding with icy horns the glacier-taken plateau of Polarion.

Higher he went each day on the hills, lifting his eyes to the dark crags from which the Sybil was rumored to descend. An obscure message seemed to call him on; and still, for a time, he did not dare to obey the summons wholly, but turned back to Cerngoth.

There came the forenoon when he climbed to a hill-meadow from which the roofs of the city were like littered shells beside a sea whose tumbling billows had become a smooth floor of turquoise. He was alone in a world of flowers: the frail mantle that summer had flung before the desolate peaks. The turf rolled away from him on every hand in broad scrolls and carpetries of flaming color. Even the wild briars had put forth their fragile, sanguine-tinted blossoms; and the very banks and precipices were heavily arrassed with low-hanging bloom.

Tortha had met no one; for he had long since left the trail by which the squat mountain people came to the city. A vague prompting, which seemed to include a promise unspoken by any voice, had led him to this lofty meadow from which a crystal rill ran seaward amid the bright cascades of flowers.

Pale, diaphanous beneath the sun, a few cirrous clouds went floating idly toward the pinnacles; and the quarrying hawks flew oceanward on broad red wings. A perfume, rich as temple-incense, rose from the blossoms whereon he had trampled; the light lay still and heavy upon him, dazzling his senses; and Tortha, a little weary from his climbing, grew faint for a moment with some strange vertigo.

Recovering, he saw before him the White Sybil, who stood amid the flowers of blood-red and cerulean like a goddess of the snow attired in veils of moon-flame. Her pale eyes, pouring an icy rapture into his veins, regarded him enigmatically. With a gesture of her hand that was like the glimmering of light on inaccessible places, she beckoned him to follow, as she turned and went upward along the slope above the meadow.

Tortha had forgotten his fatigue; had forgotten all but the celestial beauty of the Sybil. He did not question the enchantment that claimed him, the wild Uranian ecstasy that rose in his heart. He knew only that she had reappeared to him, had beckoned him; and he followed.

Soon the hills grew steeper against the overtowering crags; and barren ribs of rock emerged gloomily through the mantling flowerage. Without effort, light as a drifting vapor, the Sybil climbed on before Tortha. He could not approach her; and though the interval of distance between them increased at times, he did not altogether lose sight of her luminous figure.

Now he was among bleak ravines and savage scarps, where the Sybil was like a swimming star in the chasms, crag-flung shadows. The fierce mountain eagles screamed above him, eyeing his progress as they flew about their eyries. The chill trickle of rills born of the eternal glaciers fell upon him from overbeetling ledges; and sudden chasms yawned before his feet with a hollow roaring of vertiginous waters far below.

Tortha was conscious only of an emotion such as impels the moth to pursue a wandering flame. He did not picture to himself the aim and end of his pursuit, nor the fruition of the weird love that drew him on. Oblivious of mortal fatigue, of peril and disaster that might lie before him, he felt the delirium of a mad ascent to superhuman heights.

Above the wild ravines and escarpments, he came to a lofty pass that had led formerly between Mhu Thulan and Polarion. Here an olden highway, creviced and chasmed, and partly blocked with debris of avalanches and fallen watchtowers, ran between walls of winter-eaten rock. Down the pass, like some enormous dragon of glittering ice, there poured the vanguard of the boreal glaciers to meet the Sybil and Tortha.

Amid the strange ardor of his ascent, the poet was aware of a sudden chill that had touched the noontide. The rays of the sun had grown dull and heatless; the shadows were like the depth of ice-hewn Arctic tombs. A film of ochreous cloud, moving with magical swiftness, swept athwart the day and darkened like a dusty web, till the sun glowed through it lifeless and pale as a moon in December. The heavens above and beyond the pass were closed in with curtains of leaden-threaded grey.

Into the gathering dimness, over the glacier's machicolated ice, the Sybil sped like a flying fire, paler and more luminous against the somber cloud.

Now Tortha had climbed the fretted incline of the ice that crawled out from Polarion. He had gained the summit of the pass and would soon reach the open plateau beyond. But like a storm raised up by preterhuman sorcery, the snow was upon him now in spectral swirls and blinding flurries. It came as with the ceaseless flight of soft wide wings, the measureless coiling of vague and pallid dragons.

For a time he still discerned the Sybil, as one sees the dim glowing of a sacred lamp through altar-curtains that descend in some great temple. Then the snow thickened, till he no longer saw the guiding gleam, and knew not if he still wandered through the walled pass, or was lost upon some boundless plain of perpetual winter.

He fought for breath in the storm-stifled air. The clear white fire that had sustained him seemed to sink and fall in his icy limbs. The unearthly fervor and exaltation died away, leaving a dark fatigue, an ever-spreading numbness that rose through all his being. The bright image of the Sybil was no more than a nameless star that fell with all else he had ever known or dreamed into grey forgetfulness....

Tortha opened his eyes to a strange world. Whether he had fallen and had died in the storm, or had stumbled on somehow through its white oblivion, he could not guess: but around him now there was no trace of the driving snow or the glacier-shackled mountains.

He stood in a valley that might have been the inmost heart of some boreal paradise—a valley that was surely no part of waste Polarion. About him the turf was piled with flowers that had the frail and pallid hues of a lunar rainbow. Their delicate forms were those of the blossoms of snow and frost, and it seemed that they would

melt and vanish at a touch.

The sky above the valley was not the low-arching, tender turquoise heaven of Mhu Thulan, but was vague, dreamlike, remote, and full of an infinite violescence, like the welkin of a world beyond time and space. Everywhere there was light; but Tortha saw no sun in the cloudless vault. It was as if the sun, the moon, the stars, had been molten together ages ago and had dissolved into some ultimate, eternal luminescence.

Tall, slender trees, whose leafage of lunar green was thickly starred with blossoms delicate as those of the turf, grew in groves and clumps above the valley, and lined the margin of a stilly flowing stream that wound away into measureless misty perspectives.

Tortha noticed that he cast no shadow on the flowered ground. The trees likewise were shadowless, and were not reflected in the clear still waters. No wind lifted the blossom-heavy boughs, or stirred the countless petals amid the grass. A cryptic silence brooded over all things, like the hush of some supernal doom.

Filled with a high wonder, but powerless to surmise the riddle of his situation, the poet turned as if at the bidding of an imperatory voice. Behind him, and near at hand, there was an arbor of flowering vines that had draped themselves from tree to tree. Through the half-parted arras of bloom, in the bower's heart, he saw like a drifted snow the white veils of the Sybil.

With timid steps, with eyes that faltered before her mystic beauty, and a flaming as of blown torches in his heart, he entered the arbor. From the bank of blossoms on which she reclined, the Sybil rose to receive her worshipper. . . .

Of all that followed, much was forgotten afterwards by Tortha. It was like a light too radiant to be endured, a thought that eluded conception through surpassing strangeness. It was real beyond all that men deem reality: and yet it seemed to Tortha that he, the Sybil, and all that surrounded them, were part of an after-mirage on the deserts of time; that he was poised insecurely above life and death in some bright, fragile bower of dreams.

He thought that the Sybil greeted him in thrilling, mellifluous words of a tongue that he knew well, but had never heard. Her tones filled him with an ecstasy near to pain. He sat beside her on the faery bank, and she told him many things: divine, stupendous, perilous things; dire as the secret of life; sweet as the lore of oblivion; strange and immemorable as the lost knowledge of sleep. But she did not tell him her name, nor the secret of her essence; and still he knew not if she were ghost or woman, goddess or spirit.

Something there was in her speech of time and its mystery; something of that which lies forever beyond time; something of the grey shadow of doom that waits upon world and sun; something of love, that pursues an elusive, perishing fire; of death, the soil from which all flowers spring; of life, that is a mirage on the frozen void.

For a while Tortha was content merely to listen. A high rapture filled him, he felt the awe of a mortal in the presence of a deity. Then, as he grew accustomed to his situation, the woman-like beauty of the Sybil spoke to him no less eloquently than her words. Vacillant, by degrees, like a tide that lifts to some unearthly moon, there rose up in his heart the human love that was half of his adoration. He felt a delirium of desire, mixed with the vertigo of one who has climbed to an impossible height. He saw only the white loveliness of her divinity; and no longer did he hear clearly the high wisdom of her speech.

The Sybil paused in her ineffable discourse; and somehow, with slow, stumbling words, he dared to tell her of his love.

She made no answer, gave no gesture of assent or denial. But when he had done, she regarded him strangely; whether with love or pity, sadness or joy, he could not tell. Then, swiftly, she bent forward and kissed his brow with her pallid lips. Their kiss was like the searing of fire or ice. But, mad with his supreme longing, Tortha strove rashly to embrace the Sybil.

Dreadfully, unutterably, she seemed to change in his arms as he clasped her--to become a frozen corpse that had lain for ages in a floe-built tomb--a leper-white mummy in whose frosted eyes he read the horror of the ultimate void. Then she was a thing that had no form or name--a dark corruption that flowed and eddied in his arms--a hueless dust, a flight of gleaming atoms, that rose between his evaded fingers. Then there was nothing--and the faery-tinted flowers about him were changing also, were crumbling swiftly, were falling beneath flurries of white snow. The vast and violet heaven, the

tall slim trees, the magic, unreflecting stream--the very ground under him--all had vanished amid the universal, whirling flakes.

It seemed to Tortha that he was plunging dizzily into some deep gulf together with that chaos of driven snows. Gradually, as he fell, the air grew clear about him, and he appeared to hang suspended above the receding, dissolving storm. He was alone in a still, funereal, starless heaven; and below, at an awesome and giddy distance, he saw the dimly glittering reaches of a land sheathed with glacial ice from horizon to far-curved horizon. The snows had vanished from the dead air; and a searing cold, like the breath of the infinite ether, was about Tortha.

All this he saw and felt for a timeless instant. Then, with the swiftness of a meteor, he resumed his fall toward the frozen continent. And like the rushing flame of a meteor, his consciousness dimmed and went out on the bleak air even as he fell.

Tortha had been seen by the half-savage people of the mountains as he disappeared in the sudden storm that had come mysteriously from Polarion. Later, when the blinding flurries had died down, they found him lying on the glacier. They tended him with rough care and uncouth skill, marvelling much at the white mark that had been imprinted like a fiery brand on his sun-swart brow. The flesh was seared deeply; and the mark was shaped like the pressure of lips. But they could not know that the never-fading mark had been left by the kiss of the White Sybil. Slowly, Tortha won back to some measure of his former strength. But ever afterward there was a cloudy dimness in his mind, a blur of unresolving shadow, like the dazzlement in eyes that have looked on some insupportable light.

Among those who tended him was a pale maiden, not uncomely; and Tortha took her for the Sybil in the darkness that had come upon him. The maiden's name was Illara, and Tortha loved her in his delusion; and, forgetful of his kin and his friends in Cerngoth, he dwelt with the mountain people thereafter, taking Illara to wife and making the songs of the little tribe. For the most part, he was happy in his belief that the Sybil had returned to him; and Illara, in her way, was content, being not the first of mortal women whose lover had remained faithful to a divine illusion.