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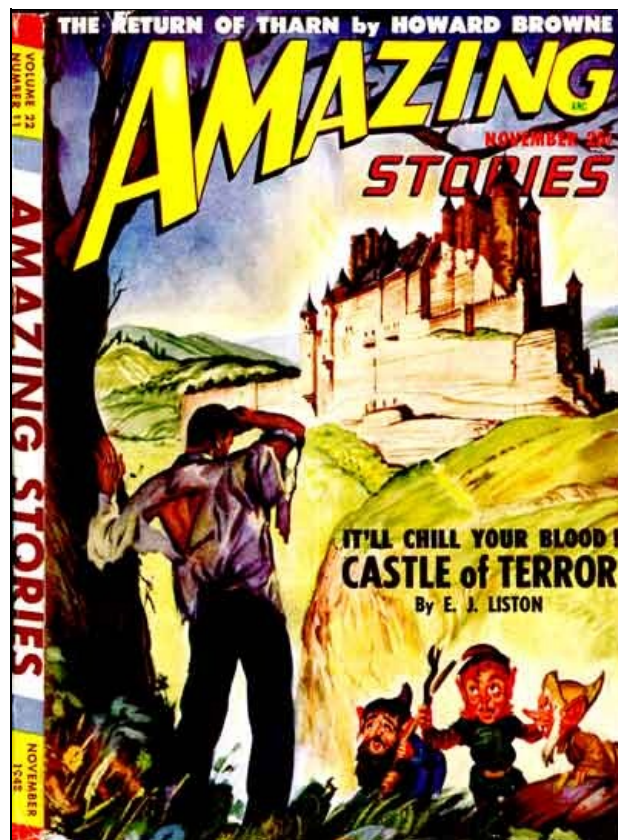
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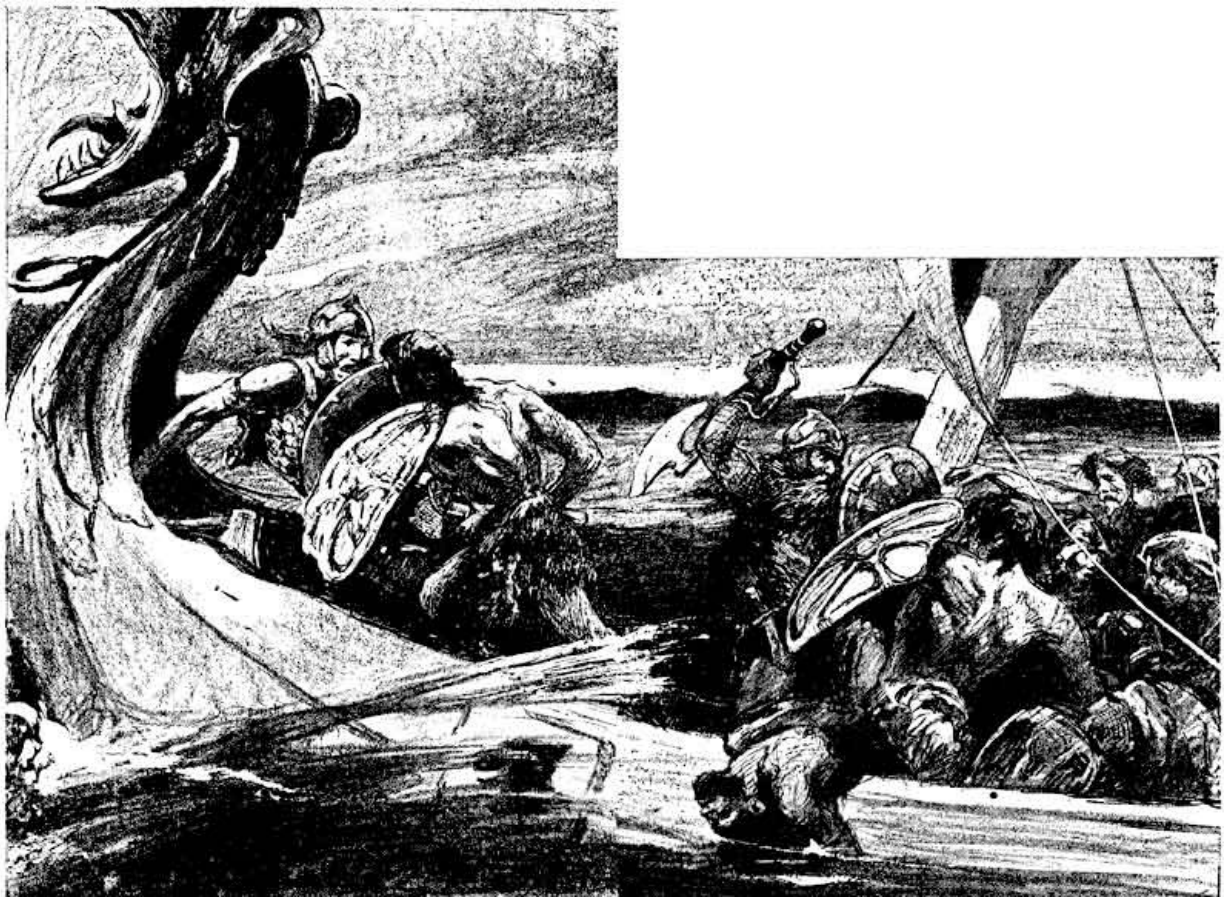
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He had to strike at the source of their power ... they leaped to prevent him

DAY OF THE DRUID

by Knut Enferd

Be'al, all-powerful god, drank the blood of his victims. Would Gaar be able to save Marna, whom Be'al kept in eternal sleep, and avenge her people?

Fog lay heavy on the North Sea, fog wreathed the land, fog crept into a man's very bones. Meanwhile the ships were locked in the harbor. Gaar lay stretched on the skin before the fire and cursed the fog.

How much longer was this infernal whiteness going to last? A man was thirty years old, in the prime of his life, with the blood running hot through the seven foot length of him. How much longer was he going to have to lie here in the great hall, eating and drinking and waiting for the roll of fat to show around his middle? A man wanted action and instead he was forced to loll around listening to stories.

Niffleheim and Hotunheim were all right, Gaar thought. A man didn't want to offend the Gods. On the other hand, Wodin forgive the thought, a man could tire of listening to the same old tales.

But wait. The voice that was speaking had stopped. This was a new voice. Elgen was finished with his tale and Vornung had started one. And this one wasn't about the Gods. Gaar twisted around and got up on one elbow.

"Who?" he demanded. "What did you say they called themselves?"

"Picts," Vornung said. In his day Vornung had sailed with the best of them, but now he was old. "It was many years ago. After a storm we found ourselves washed up on this strange shore."

"What sort of people are they?"

"An unlovely bunch, hairy, dressed in skins."

"Could they fight?"

"Ptuh." Vornung spat into the fire. "One touch of our swords and they'd had enough. Only one thing they could do well. They could tell stories."

He leaned back and took a draught of mead and wiped his mouth reflectively.

"But what stories! We were stuck there for months and I learned enough of their tongue to understand them. They told tales that could curdle a man's blood, tales of a land that lies to the south of them, of treasure, of a beautiful woman locked in eternal sleep by the priests of her people."

Treasure and a beautiful woman. This was something to make a man sit up. Gaar's big hands were locked about his knees as he rocked back and forth thoughtfully.

"How far?" he asked.

"That they would not say. When they spoke of this they spoke fearfully. We might have pressed them, but we were in a hurry to get home."

Gaar was on his feet now. He went to the door and looked out. There was a hint of breeze, from landward for a change. Maybe the fog would lift soon.

"Tell us more," he said over his shoulder....

Vornung had been wrong about these Picts. They weren't afraid to fight, and they weren't waiting for the fight to come to them. Under cover of darkness they swarmed in over the gunwales of the ship.

Unlovely they were, and unwashed. Gaar had the scent of one in his nostrils as the dark fellow came at him. Gaar struck out and the Pict went overboard.

Luckily, the surprise had not been complete. And these Norsemen were used to fighting in close and rocky quarters. They sailed in with a will. Gaar was not too busy to do a bit of wondering.

A man was crazy to trust an old fool like Vornung, crazy to follow a dream of white skin and red lips and incredible beauty.

Of course, these men of the North would have admitted that they were all a little mad to begin with. Who else but madmen would take such a tiny craft across hundreds of leagues of stormy sea?

Gaar laughed aloud. With ten men like his he'd sail anywhere, fight anyone. Elgen, up in the bow, had a Pict in each hand and was cracking their heads together. In the stern, Asgar was making short work of three Picts.

This fight wasn't going to last long. And a good thing. The way the Picts swung their clubs they might just happen to knock a few holes in the hull. Gaar breathed easier when the last of them went down.

"Now," he said. "Maybe we can talk some sense to them."

Vornung had taught him as much as he could recall of the language of the Picts. With a silent prayer that Vornung's memory had been good in at least this one respect, Gaar hauled a swarthy, bowlegged fellow to his feet.

"Look here. Can you understand me?"

Then the sun came up and the Pict got a look at the man who held him.

"I understand you." His words came through chattering teeth.

"Good. Don't be afraid. We mean no harm."

So Vornung hadn't been completely wrong. Gaar talked, keeping his eyes glued on the man before him. The fellow knew what he was talking about. Mention of the girl who slept brought a secret gleam to his eye. What about all the others? What about the priests?

"*The Druids.*" It was a whisper.

"Is that how they are called? How far to this land?"

Gaar saw there wasn't going to be any answer to that. The Pict was scared. He was shaking his head. Some of his friends were coming around and they'd heard too. They were all turning pale around the gills.

"Tell him we'll hold his head under water until he speaks up," Asgar suggested.

Gaar hesitated. Fighting was one thing, torture another. It was all right to cut a man to pieces as long as he had a chance to do the same to you.

Maybe threats would do the trick. He told the Pict what Asgar had suggested and the man licked his lips. The rest of the Picts were in a panic, babbling among themselves.

Gaar understood enough of what they were saying. They were pointing at the sun. What the devil? Was this going to turn into one of those things? Were the Druids some sort of gods who lived in the sun?

No, that wasn't it either. The Druids were real enough. But they had some power that came from the sun, that could turn a man to cinders. To speak too much about them would mean death.

"No more certain a death than awaits you if you don't talk," Gaar said.

He narrowed his eyes, made them as cruel as he could. He drew the sword from his scabbard, ran his finger along the edge.

The blood was hammering at his temples. That dream wasn't so crazy now. He could see her as though she were before him. Black hair hung about alabaster shoulders. Lips as red as ripe berries, lips that had waited a thousand years for his kiss.

"Wait," Gaar whispered. "Not much longer now." His sword glinted in the sunlight, hovered at the man's throat.

"I will tell you all I know," the Pict said.

The inlet was a perfect hiding place for the ship. There were enough branches about to screen it from distant eyes. And yet Gaar had the feeling that they were being watched.

He swung around suddenly. Nothing to be seen except the gently waving branches. A harmless scene, the dancing waters of the inlet and the serenity of the woods, and yet terror lurked there.

Considering the fact that their knowledge was only from hearsay, the Picts had directed him well. Down the coast of this great island, they had said, and then through a long channel. And then you sailed around the southern end and to the westward. There was a smaller island and a smaller channel.

And now it would be overland travel. Not far, the Picts had said, and they had wondered at these men who had the daring to sail through strange waters to certain death. There was a plain rising from the coast. Somewhere on that plain Gaar would find what he sought.

"I have a feeling," Asgar muttered. He was as blond as the rest, but a foot shorter than Gaar and with a chest that threatened to burst through his breastplate.

"So have I," Gaar admitted. "In my bones." And out of the plain to the north came a scent like an opened grave.

They walked through the forest with their hands on their swords, these men of the North. A long twilight here, a twilight that brought shadows that could deceive a man. A strange land this, where Spring came early and where the air was soft.

Swords were worthless here, the Picts had said. A man's strength meant nothing.

A voice whispered to Gaar's mind that the Picts were right. But there was another voice, a voice that had grown stronger night by night as he sailed southward. This was a voice that came from long dead lips, but lips that retained their freshness.

"I hear something," Asgar whispered. "I hear something inside my head."

The others had heard it too. They stared at each other in the gathering dusk. There was magic here. But Gaar knew that there was magic to fight this magic.

And then suddenly it was night. On a far off peak a fire spurted upward. Was it a beacon or a device to lure them to doom? Gaar wondered. They paused in a grove, in a circle of stones. It was time to rest. A lassitude crept over them.

He knew then how strong the dark forces were. His inner voice warned him of the death that lurked in a circle of stones. But the power in this grove was strong. Gaar felt the torpor take hold of him. He saw the men stagger. Then, with his last ounce of strength, he had his foot against one of the stones and was kicking out.

The circle was broken and with it the spell. Gaar shook himself. He had learned one thing, to stay outside stone circles.

Overhead the stars wheeled. There was the Bear, and there was the Bull. If you could read them rightly the ocean was not trackless. The seasons were there if you could read them.

Tomorrow would be Spring. And tonight men in long black robes walked the great circle, related each of the stones to its constellation in the heavens, canted their hymns to the dark powers that had spawned them.

Tomorrow would be Spring. Tomorrow the sun would slant down between the two tallest stones

and fall blood-red upon the Cromlech, upon the altar. Tonight they would burn brighter.

And Be'al would be appeased. Be'al the All-Powerful would taste the blood of the victims, would smell their flesh, and Be'al would know that his sons had not forgotten him.

He was all they had not forgotten. Too long for them to remember, too long since they had crossed the void from their parent planet. The sciences they had brought were gone. Only this residue of blood-lust remained.

"The girl stirs," Cyngled said. His beard was black and thick, his skin white, and whiter still the circular scar on his forehead.

In the sepulchre the air was damp as the high-priest looked down upon the girl. In the light of the flickering yew-torches her eyelids seemed to move. Cyngled's fingers hovered at the hilt of the sacrificial knife.

"Marna stirs," Glendyn whispered. "Tomorrow she will awaken. Let it be for the last time. As long as she lives we are in danger."

"She can do nothing alone."

"But she is never alone. How many times has her beauty brought men to her aid?"

"Their bones would make a tall pile," Cyngled agreed. His eyes were bright beneath hooded lids. "What about those who landed today?"

"They are somewhere in the forest. Once we thought we had them, but they broke away."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor and a hooded priest came hurrying over the worn stones of the floor. His fingers traced the sacred symbols in the damp air of the crypt.

"Well?" Cyngled demanded.

"We are having trouble following them. Their thoughts are shrouded. Something comes between us and them."

Cyngled's eyes darted back to Marna. He knew what it was that protected these strangers. Even in her sleep the girl had power. Glendyn was right.

"Tomorrow, then," Cyngled murmured. "In the meantime, watch her. You here, Glendyn, and you above, Twyn."

Gaar moved swiftly. Behind him came the others. They had covered miles but they were not tired. Not much farther, Gaar knew. The growth was thinner.

"We'll come at them straight ahead," Elgen said, moving up to Gaar's side. "They'll never know what hit them."

In the starlight Gaar could see his outline. Asgar's bulk loomed close behind. Maybe the usual method of attack was best. Maybe Elgen was right. Yet there was this knowledge that swords would not be enough.

Then he caught the sound of voices. Out of the darkness ahead came a deep-throated, monotonous chant. With startling abruptness the forest ended and they were at the edge of a vast clearing.

Huge stones, too great for a man to move, formed a perfect circle. Towering thirty feet above the others were two monoliths standing a few feet apart. And directly before them was an altar, a great slab of rock supported by four stone legs.

About the altar hooded shadows moved slowly, murmuring their endless chants. Gaar was tempted. The surprise should be complete. But this thing held him.

He waited, and was glad that he had. There was the faint and flickering light of a torch. It seemed to come out of the very ground beyond the circle of stones. It *did* come out of the ground.

There was an opening of some sort, the mouth of a cave. Two figures emerged and he saw them clearly before the torch was extinguished. Then, even in the dim starlight, Gaar saw one of the figures move away.

"One of them is guarding the cave," Asgar whispered.

"In that case there must be something to guard." He thought he knew what it was. He was certain he knew.

"Listen," Gaar whispered. "I'm going to try to get inside."

"Alone?"

"One is better than a dozen for this job. That fellow seems to have pulled back into the mouth of the cave. If I can get him quickly his friends may never notice he's gone."

"What about us?"

"You wait here. It's almost dawn. By then I should be back."

"And if you're not back by then?"

"Turn around and get to the ship as fast as you can. There's no use trying if I can't get through. Don't ask me how I know that. I just do. That's an order. Understand?"

They understood. Gaar unbuckled his sword, handed his shield to Elgen. Next to come off was the breastplate. When a man's greatest need was stealth, he didn't want any metal on him.

A moment later he was off through the thin screen of trees, moving silently around the great circle of stones. At every step he felt it stronger, this voice inside himself. He had to keep out of the circle. He knew that.

Then he was behind the slight rise in the earth that was the opening of the cave. Very slowly now, Gaar moved, feeling his way. He felt the rock beneath his fingers. A few steps more and there was no rock. He turned inward.

Hugging the wall he inched forward. There was a shadow, darker than the rest. Lips moved in the darkness, forming soundless words. Gaar's hands reach out, found a throat. The lips stopped moving.

Gaar lifted the body, carried it back away from the mouth of the cave. He almost fell down the stone staircase that yawned suddenly at his feet. When Gaar had recovered his poise he went on, taking each step gingerly.

He was going down into a darkness that smelled of the dungeon and even worse. Walls grew damp and clammy where he touched them. Slimy things scurried across the floor. The path Gaar was following twisted and turned.

Then there was a door. Gaar fumbled in the darkness. The door opened soundlessly. Beyond it was a faint and fitful light that led him onward toward its source. It led him into the room.

Gaar knew it was the end of the search. Its bareness told him what he had already suspected. There was no treasure. This was a people that did not believe in jewelled trappings. But the girl was here, in this very room. That was the only thing that mattered.

A black-robed figure hid the sarcophagus from Gaar's view. A broad back, wearing the folds of the dark priesthood. The back shifted uneasily, as though feeling eyes upon it, and Gaar caught a glimpse of something white beyond.

He stepped forward, light as a giant cat. He took another step and his foot scraped earth. The sound was minute, almost inaudible, but Glendyn heard. He whirled, his hand flashing toward his girdle. Gaar closed the gap between them in a single leap. His left hand caught Glendyn's wrist, forced the knife back. But Glendyn was a tricky one, hard to hold. He shifted, kicked out, and Gaar stumbled.

The knife was at his throat now. He knocked it aside, drove his fist upward into a soft belly. Glendyn doubled and his jaw met Gaar's other fist as it came up. There was the splintering of bone.

Beneath a white, filmy covering she lay, beneath a flimsy veil that pressed gently upon her rounded form. Her limbs were whiter than the veil that covered them. Her hair was black as night. Her lips were redder than in his vision.

A thousand sleeps she had slept, and more. Older than the land from which Gaar had come, and yet she was younger than he. He bent forward and pressed his lips to hers. They were warm and yielding.

"Wake up," Gaar whispered. Then, louder, "Wake up!"

Was she dead? It seemed to him that she stirred, and yet it might have been the flickering light which created an illusion. Now he ran his hand through her hair. His big hands slapped at her cheeks, gently at first and then harder. His voice was insistent, commanding.

Very slowly, then, her eyes opened. Blank and staring, they were, as she hovered on the brink. Gaar's will pulled her to life. The blankness went out of her eyes and was replaced by a sudden gladness.

"You came. I knew you would come."

She struggled to sit up and saw that only the veil covered her nudity. She blushed. Gaar turned his back, bent and removed the black robe from the crumpled figure on the floor. Over his shoulder he handed the robe to the girl. When he turned to her again she was sitting up, a trace of color still in her cheeks.

"Where are they?" Marna asked fearfully. There was loathing in the glance she threw at Glendyn's body. "There are many more. Where are they?"

"Up above," Gaar told her. "This one and another were left to watch you."

"Good. They won't be coming back for a long time. Now they are busy preparing the sacrifices to Be'al." Marna shuddered. "It is the feast of Beltane."

Gaar spoke quickly. "What sort of men are they?"

"They are not men. They are devils. A long time ago they came out of the sky in strange ships. They brought strange powers and a strange god who demanded human sacrifices. My people were driven out, killed. I am the only one left."

"But why did they save you?"

"As a hostage, at first. And later because it pleased them to keep me as a symbol of the race they had vanquished. Every year I have awakened and they have used me as a mock sacrifice. And then they have put me to sleep again for another year."

"And today again?"

"For the last time. They have lost their power to act at a distance. And they grow afraid that I may call someone they cannot defeat. Their power is great now on only this one day when the sun comes directly between the two stones they brought with them from their mother world."

She started suddenly and Gaar stared at her. "What is it?" he demanded.

"I feel something. I feel danger."

There was no time to ask questions. Gaar knew she would not be wrong. This daughter of a lost people had a knowledge he could not fathom. He lifted her out of the sarcophagus and set her on her feet.

"We've got to get out of here. Once we reach my men and set back for the coast they'll never stop us."

They were running now, back along the corridor down which Gaar had come. Half way they went, and then they heard the voices and the feet that came toward them from above.

Gaar listened intently. There were too many. One or two he would have fought, maybe even a half-dozen. But this was the tramp of many feet. They must have found the body at the head of the Stairs. Gaar cursed his luck.

"We'll have to go back. Is there another way out?"

"No none. It was the burial place for the kings of my people before the Druids came."

And it looked like it would be his burial place as well, Gaar thought. But he had to go back anyway. He couldn't take a chance on the girl being hurt in a fight in the dark. Besides, that fellow he had killed had a knife. It would be better than no weapon at all.

The feet were close behind them as they ran. The girl was too slow. Gaar scooped her up and ran with her under his arm. But still not swiftly enough. They had been overheard.

He had barely time to swing Marna behind the sarcophagus and out of immediate danger. He bent and tore the knife from Glendyn's loose grasp. And then they were on him, a flood of black-robed figures.

Blood spurted as the knife in Gaar's hand flashed. A man screamed, and then another as Gaar's fist made pulp of flesh and bone. His hands struck blows like Thor's hammer. He made them pay dearly for every backward step he took. But they came on still.

They were too many for him. They forced him back until a cold wall stopped him. Then, by the sheer force of numbers they overwhelmed him. He went down under a torrent of blows that drove everything from his mind but the thought that he had failed Marna.

Daylight, and Gaar's head ached as consciousness returned. He seemed to be a single aching bruise from head to foot. After a while he realized that Marna lay beside him at the bottom of the stairs that led to the cavern mouth.

Light came down strongly, too strongly. It was long after dawn. A stray thought flashed across Gaar's mind: his men would be well on their way to the ship: Yet there was no use castigating himself. Marna would have died before they could have reached her if they had come in a body.

"I'm sorry," Gaar said, and tried to turn toward Marna. Leather thongs bound him tightly but he rocked back and forth until he tipped onto his side.

"Not as sorry as I," she said, her eyes soft on his face. "If I had not called you would never have come."

"The only thing a Norseman fears is that he should die in bed," Gaar told her.

But he wasn't ready to die yet. If he could only get a little play into these thongs! His muscles bulged with the strain as he threw his strength into the effort. Then a scream filtered down and sent a shiver along his spine.

"The sacrifices have started," Marna said. "It will not be long now. They will be coming for us soon."

"Can't *you* do anything?" Gaar asked. "Can't you fight them with their own weapons?"

"Not while I am awake. When I sleep my soul is in communion with my people who have gone and I draw strength from them. But this is the feast of Beltane. While the sun comes directly between the two great stones the magic of the Druids is at its most potent. And mine is waning."

As her voice faded there came again the scream of a soul in mortal fear. The scream died quickly, merging into a rising paean from the Druids. Then there was a patter of sandal-clad feet and the light from above was blocked by the figure of Cyngled, the high priest.

In Cyngled's hand the great sacrificial knife dripped blood. Be'al would drink well this day, Be'al would be appeased. Behind Cyngled came other priests, lesser ones whose faces revealed unholy joy as they came down the stairs.

Two of them lifted Marna but it took four to carry Gaar. Strong light made him blink as they emerged from the mouth of the cave. Shock forced his eyes to remain open as they entered the charmed circle.

Blood-red came the sun between the two monoliths to fall upon the great Cromlech that was redder still with human gore. A wave of nausea swept up from Gaar's stomach. He fought it down.

Then the strength filtered out of him as he was carried into the circle. Now he was a child in their hands. He felt himself being lifted, felt his back touch the slippery stone. Beside him Marna was laid, the black robe she had worn ripped from her body.

Cyngled's chant rose above them, the knife came up and hovered at Gaar's throat. The knife was coming down. And then it stopped! It stopped as the air was split by the battle cry of the Norsemen!

Gaar twisted his head and saw them come out of the woods beyond the circle. Like madmen they raged across the clearing. But nobody rushed to oppose them! Instead, the Druid priests drew back, gathered about Cyngled. As the Norsemen came into the circle the high priest's hands drew the magic symbols in the air.

And the Norsemen stopped! Like men of stone they were, a tableau of arrested motion.

There was no hope. The bitterness of gall was in Gaar's mouth as he turned his head from the scene. He looked at Marna. Her eyes were bright, burning into his own. No hopelessness there. Her eyes were speaking to him.

They were willing him, willing him to strength! Gaar felt it come back to him. Her magic was stronger than she knew. He felt the strength come back in a surge that would not be denied.

This was only leather that held him. The leather could bite into his flesh as he strained. But it could not hurt him. His great chest filled with air and the thongs gave, stretched. And burst!

In a single leap he was off the altar. He wanted to rage into the Druid priests, to tear them apart with his bare hands. But there were too many. And Marna's will was telling him that there was something else he must do.

He knew what it was. He had to strike at the source of their power. They were turning to meet his charge, setting themselves solidly.

Gaar wheeled, spurted around them and then around the Cromlech. They guessed his purpose and leaped to stop him. They had to prevent him from reaching the two great stones. Gaar battered them aside and went through them.

His back was against one of the monoliths, his feet against the other. He climbed that way, ignoring the knives that slashed at his back. Then he was above the reach of their arms. The sun was full in his face. His shadow blocked the altar. His back was on stone, his feet were on stone. Two great pillars, rooted in the earth, and against them the strength of one man.

ut that man was Gaar. Slowly his legs straightened, his shoulders went back. All the power that was in his mighty frame went into the thrust. It was a power that would not be denied.

BA pillar swayed, tottered, and was ripped out of the earth. Gaar felt himself falling and twisted catlike in the air to land on his feet.

He whirled to meet the charge of the Druids. Cynghled's hands still traced the air but his power was gone. The Norsemen exploded into life again, their swords whirring a song of death. Only Cynghled did not lose his head. Defeated the Druids were, and defeated forever, but he could snatch some measure of victory from the defeat. He was at Marna's side when Gaar reached him.

One great hand on Cynghled's throat, another at his waist. Gaar lifted him high and hurled him earthward. Cynghled twitched once and was still. The stone knife was in his hand but it would never be used again. The day of the Druids was over.

Marna was smiling at Gaar as he cut the thongs that bound her. This time her lips came up to meet his. For Elgen and Asgar and the rest there was no treasure. But they had no complaints. It had been a good fight. For Gaar there was the greatest treasure of all.

The hint of sorrow was out of Marna's eyes. The past was gone, and there was nothing here for her now. She was the daughter of a once great people. She would be the mother of a greater one. Her arm was linked with Gaar's as they took the first steps back toward the ship which would take them northward.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAY OF THE DRUID ***

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