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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Jest of Droom-Avista

By HENRY KUTTNER

A brief, poetic story about an alien city and a metallic doom

THERE is a tale they tell of voices that called eerily by night in the marble streets of long-fallen Bel Yarnak, saying: "Evil is come to the land; doom falls on the fair city where our children's children walk. Wo, wo unto Bel Yarnak." Then did the dwellers in the city gather affrightedly in huddled groups, casting furtive glances at the Black Minaret that spears up gigantically from the temple gardens; for, as all men know, when doom comes to Bel Yarnak,

the Black Minaret will play its part in that dreadful Ragnarok.

Wo, wo unto Bel Yarnak! Fallen for ever are the shining silver towers, lost the magic, soiled the glamor. For stealthily and by night, under the triple moons that hurtle swiftly across the velvet sky, doom crept out inexorably from the Black Minaret.

Mighty magicians were the priests of the Black Minaret. Mighty were they, alchemists and sorcerers, and always they

sought the Stone of the Philosophers, that strange power which would enable them to transmute all things into the rarest of metals. And in a vault far below the temple gardens, toiling endlessly at glittering alembics and shining crucibles, lit by the violet glow of *ocuru*-lamps, stood Thorazor, mightiest of priests, wisest of all who dwelt in Bel Yarnak. Days and weeks and years he had toiled, while strange moons reeled down to the horizons, seeking the Elixir. Gold and silver paved the streets; blazing diamonds, moon-glowing opals, purple gems of strange fire, meteor-fallen, made of Bel Yarnak a splendid vision, shining by night to guide the weary traveler across the sandy wastes. But a rarer element Thorazor sought. Other worlds possessed it, for the intricate telescopes of the astronomers revealed its presence in the flaming suns that fill the chaotic sky, making night over Bel Yarnak a mirror reflecting the blazing scintillance of the city, a star-carpeted purple tapestry where the triple moons weave their arabesque patterns. So toiled Thorazor under the Black Minaret all of glistening jet onyx.

He failed, and again he failed, and at length he knew that only with the gods' aid could he find the Elixir he sought. Not the little gods, nor the gods of good and evil, but Droom-avista, the Dweller Beyond, the Dark Shining One, Thorazor called up blasphemously from the abyss. For Thorazor's brain was warped; he had toiled endlessly, and failed as often; in his mind was but one thought. So he did that which is forbidden: he traced the Seven Circles and spoke the Name which wakens Droom-avista from his brooding sleep.

A shadow swept down, darkening over the Black Minaret. Yet Bel Yarnak was untroubled; glorious and beautiful the shining city glowed while thin voices called weirdly in the streets.

Wo, wo unto Bel Yarnak! For the shadow darkened and encompassed the Black Minaret, and midnight black closed ominously about the sorcerer Thorazor. All alone he stood in his chamber, no gleam of light relieving the awful darkness that heralded the coming of the Dark Shining One, and slowly, ponderously, there rose up before him a Shape. But Thorazor cried out and hid his eyes, for none may look upon the Dweller Beyond lest his soul be blasted for ever.

Like the groaning tocsin of a Cyclopean bell came the voice of the Dweller, rumbling terribly under the Black Minaret. Yet only Thorazor heard it, for he alone had called up Droom-avista.

"Now my sleep is troubled," the god cried. "Now my dreams are shattered and I must weave new visions. Many worlds, a mightier cosmos, have you ruined; yet there are other worlds and other dreams, and perchance I shall find amusement in this little planet. For is not one of my names the Jester?"

Shuddering and fearful, still hiding his eyes, Thorazor spoke.

"Great Droom-avista, I know your name; I have said it. By the doom even upon you, you must obey one command of him who calls you up."

The darkness throbbed and pulsed. Ironically Droom-avista assented. "Command, then. O little fool, command your god! For always have men sought to enslave gods, and ever have they succeeded too well."

Yet Thorazor heeded not the warning. One thought only had he: the Elixir, the mighty magic that would transmute all things into the rarest of elements, and to Droom-avista he spoke fearlessly. He said his desire.

"But is that all?" the god said slowly. "Now this is but a small thing for which to disturb my slumber. So shall I grant

your desire—for am I not named the Jester? Do thus and thus.” And Droom-avista spoke of that which would transmute all things into the rarest of metals on Bel Yarnak.

Then the god withdrew, and the shadow lifted. Again Droom-avista sank into his dreaming sleep, weaving intricate cosmogonies; and speedily he forgot Thorazor. But the sorcerer stood in his chamber, trembling with exultation, for at his feet lay a jewel. This had the god left behind.

FLAMING, blazing, streaming with weird fire the gem illuminated the dark chamber, driving the shadows back into the distant corners. Yet Thorazor had no eyes for its beauty; this was the Philosopher's Stone, this the Elixir! A glory was in the wizard's eyes as he prepared a brew as Droom-avista had commanded.

Then the mixture seethed and bubbled in the golden crucible, and over it Thorazor held the shining jewel. The culmination of a lifetime's hopes was reached as he dropped the gem into the frothing brew.

For a heartbeat nothing happened. Then, slowly at first, but with increasing swiftness, the golden crucible changed in color, slowly darkening. Thorazor cried out, blessing Droom-avista, for the crucible was no longer golden. It had been transmuted, by the power of the jewel, into the rarest of metals.

The gem, as though lighter than the bubbling mixture, lay lightly on the liquid surface. But the metamorphosis was not yet complete. The darkness crept down

the pedestal that supported the crucible; it spread out like a fungoid stain across the onyx floor. It reached the feet of Thorazor, and the sorcerer stood frozen, glaring down at the frightful transmutation that was changing his body from flesh and blood into solid metal. And in a flash of blinding realization Thorazor knew Droom-avista's jest, and knew that by the power of the Elixir all things are changed to the rarest of elements.

He shrieked once, and then his throat was no longer flesh. And slowly, slowly, the stain spread across the floor and up the stone walls of the chamber. The shining onyx dulled and lost its sheen. And the hungry stain crept out through the Black Minaret, out upon Bel Yarnak, while the thin voices cried sadly in the marble streets.

Wo, wo unto Bel Yarnak! Fallen is the glory, dulled and tarnished the gold and silver splendor, cold and lifeless the beauty of the magic citadel. For outward and ever outward crept the stain, and in its path all was changed. The people of Bel Yarnak no longer move light-heartedly about their houses; lifeless images throng the streets and palaces. Immobile and silent sits the Sindara on a tarnished throne; dark and grim looms the city under the hurtling moons. It is Dis; it is the damned city, and sad voices in the silent metropolis mourn for lost glory.

Fallen is Bel Yarnak! Changed by the magic of Thorazor and by Droom-avista's jest, changed to the rarest of all elements in that planet of gold and silver and shining gems.

No longer Bel Yarnak—it is Dis, the City of Iron!

