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**DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, EDITOR**

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# THE UNFINISHED CITY

by Martin Pearson

A fantasy of perfection and imperfection. A tale of a quaint city in the jungle and the curious fate that overtook a very clever thief who came there.

Illustration by Bok



**T**HERE ARE two ways to enter Oo. One is by way of the Zoon, that narrow, deep river that runs through all the jungle continent of Ild-Chun-

darath and carries the craft from all the little nations and cities and unnumbered tribes that have their domain along its heavily overgrown banks. It is

by way of Zoon that nearly everyone comes to the city, that the little moon-sailed vessels of Gul and Tindorion and Luul come floating down the turgid

waters from inland mountains and come to rest at half-sunken, moss-covered wharves that stand on rotting logs sunk in the muddy bottom. Some unload here their cargoes of rare spices or strange fruits from the interior; others, perhaps, put in only for the night, for none desire to sail along the river in the starless darkness of the Evening Star, wherein abound dangers not to be described.

The sailors do not mind putting in at Oo, that wondrously strange city, the like of which is not to be found elsewhere. They like its smiling, fat little people with their chubby faces and ever readiness to burst out into peals of hearty laughter. They like the quaint hearty laughter. They like the quaint little shops and the narrow winding streets and, best of all that which tickles their fancy, the queer towers and objects made in Oo.

All this lies along the waterfront. There is the heart of the city, there lies the soul of Oo, towards the river it turns its face. But it is in the back of the city that the second entrance lies. In those semi-deserted stretches the high dank jungle presses against the ancient crumbling walls and long green vines hang down from the branches out-thrust over the wall and push their way along the streets, seeking the cracks and devices with which to entrench themselves and slowly, with the passing of centuries, to tear apart the pavements and buildings.

That was how Woth of Druun came to Oo. He came through the jungle path and went through the little door. And none saw him because nobody comes through that way and few dwell near there.

**W**OTH WAS a tall thin man clad in the skin-tight somber garments of his native land. Typical of Druun were his ways, for which reason he had not cared to be seen by too many. For the people of Druun believe in Swish, the

God of Darkness. And Swish teaches that all things belong to any who have the ability to take them. For, according to his ideas, those who can make off with what is another's successfully must be wise and clever and skilled in silent cunning. And perhaps Swish may be right. Who are we to tell?

Woth traversed rapidly the back part of the town and soon entered the wider, better kept and more frequented streets where the life of the little city lies. And as he passed into these parts and went among the populace and the inhabitants, his manner changed. He lost his furtive quiet airs and assumed a peaceful unhurried stroll and a gay smile. He nodded here and there to make people think he had many acquaintances and he joined in the laughter of the shopkeepers and sailors. But as he walked his eyes and hands were busy. He took in, in his easy glance, all the little details and hints of the homes and shops around him that make the difference between the expert and the bungler. He never hesitated to assist passersby in their little troubles. He helped the little old ladies in their quaint robes to carry their bundles. He assisted the funny plump shopkeepers to make sales to the gullible river men, never hesitating to assure them that the purchase was very excellent. He would be there when anyone should slip on the pavements and would always graciously help the person to his or her feet. And by and by the long deep pockets of his clothes began to become very bulky and heavy. For Woth was always repaid for his kindness, even if involuntarily.

But mostly his attention was on the town about him. For Oo is a most unusual city the like of which might never be seen again on the face of any of the globes of the sun. Not for nothing is it called the Unfinished City. For it is indeed unfinished. Every tower and every structure is incomplete. Each of the many

stone towers that top every house of any importance ends in that half-complete chamber on top. Exactly as if the builders had suddenly been called away and never got time to come back and finish. And every wall and house has a corner or a section that is not complete. In everything there was some imperfection. In the clothes of the people there are parts that seem unfinished. In the tables and three legged chairs there is some part that is not polished or colored or carved and that makes it imperfect. Even the very names of the people drawl off into hints of something left unsaid. If you go into a shop and buy something you will find it incomplete. For the things that are made in Oo are never perfect.

**W**OTH BECAME most amazed at this constant imperfection and somewhat annoyed, for he was a connoisseur and it pained him to see these things with imperfections that marred their value. He sat himself down before a little dispenser of liquid refreshments, and, as he quaffed his not entirely filled goblet (for which he had not paid the entire amount), he spoke to the smiling keeper.

"Tell me, oh man of Oo, why is it that nothing here is perfect in your most respected city? It finds me most astonished."

The dispenser of liquid goods looked at him with blank incredulity. "Surely from what far off land do you come, oh man of dark garments, that you know not of us? I thought that none did not know of Oo and its God."

"Indeed, oh most honorable man, my land is so far off that you would not know its name," lied Woth glibly. "But, tell me, why is nothing here perfect?"

The shop-keeper answered sonorously as if repeating something he had learned by heart. "Nothing is perfect save Noom. And Noom is the God of Oo. None but Noom can make anything perfect. We who are only his children and his servants can

not make anything truly complete. Were we to try, it would be only folly, for truly no man can make a thing so perfect as to pass the inspection of the All-Seeing Eye. And so to show our great respect and reverence for our God, we do not attempt it."

The man from Druun pondered this a minute. Then he voiced his thoughts.

"That is a most wonderful belief, oh man of Oo. I would fain see Noom, who alone is perfect. Can you direct me to his temple?"

The smiling native nodded and pointed out the way. He bade him go and see for himself the greatness and perfection of Noom. Woth bowed to him and passed away through the crowd to the place indicated. Down the crooked street of the wine merchants, he passed, and into the narrow way of the fur workers. Finally he entered a great square.

**I**N the center of the square stood a huge building. It was highly decorated and elaborately carved. Edges of gold and great diamonds which are quite common along the Zoon ornamented the white domed structure and made it truly beautiful. The four scarlet towers each ending in a fused mass of gold as if the tops had been burned by a bolt from the clouds made a remarkable fitting for it.

Woth crossed the square and went to the open doorway. As he entered through the carved golden archway his eyes caught for a moment those of a little man clad in a flowing purple robe squatting at one side of the entrance. The little man was fat and old and his eyes twinkled merrily as he looked into those of Woth. But Woth gave him scarce a glance as he passed inside.

There was a semi-darkness in the interior. He saw, lined all along the wall of the great circular chamber, hundreds of little statues each facing the center and each was an unfinished model of the great statue in the

center.

The figure of Noom was carved out of a single colossal block of bluish white stone. It was a figure of a semi-manlike creature, squat, very bulky, and fat. On its broad face, resting on the bulky body, with no sign of a neck between was an expression of amusement. A grin split the features and the eyes almost twinkled as one looked at them.

It was truly perfect. After seeing the incompleteness of the outside city, one could almost believe in Noom's divinity. For every single bit of the great body was carved with a minuteness and perfection that defied detection. No matter how close you got to the image you would find it perfectly carved. Every pore and every, almost microscopic mark to be found on a living creature was there. Almost would one think that Noom was indeed alive.

But that was not what caught the eye of the thin visitor. What he noticed was the necklace that hung around Noom's neck. It was composed of hundreds of little miniatures of Noom carved out of innumerable rare and valuable stones. One in particular caught the experienced eye of Woth. That was a figure about an inch long carved out of a single flawless lynquar gem. Woth almost collapsed when he saw it. The lynquar, rarest stone in all Vesper. The beautiful gem that glowed with its varicolored inward eternal light that was unlike anything else in the universe. He saw instantly that it was worth a kingdom if he could secure it. Woth glanced around.

There was none about. Nobody was in sight. Woth could detect no secret peep-holes that might indicate an unseen watcher. And if Woth could not see any, there were none to be seen. Quickly he reached out a hand, snapped the chain that held the valuable bauble on its central band. Bringing his hand down in almost the same motion, he dropped the gorgeous jewel into a little hidden pocket made for

such things.

Woth turned and strolled unconcernedly out. Although he was intensely excited, he showed not one sign of it. Leaving the temple, he advanced across the square and soon was lost to sight in the crowded streets.

But the little fat man crouched at the entrance smiled strangely and glanced inside with his curiously sharp eyes. He dropped back to his seat on the pavement with an enigmatic nod, and a soft chuckle.

Woth passed through the inhabited part of the city in the same easy manner he had arrived. But he made no stops or offered aid. He soon reached the back section where the great jungle slowly creeps its way in. He threaded his way stealthily now, for he did not want to be seen on that part of his trip. As he passed through the wall, he glanced once more at the topless towers of Oo and then carefully shut the wooden door behind him.

Through the steaming jungle he passed, swiftly threading his way through the hanging vines and thick boles of the strange fern-like trees. He travelled swiftly and silently over the thick carpet of fallen ferns. In a few hours it was dark. The pitchy blackness of a Vesperian night was upon him. In the sky, no star showed, no planet nor moon sent its rays to pierce the black. For the cloud belts hang eternal over the Evening Star and never clear.

High in the bole of a tree, Woth lay sound asleep. He feared not the darkness, for those who worship Swish are under his protection and are never harmed at night. And so he slept.

It was day again. What fearsome things had occurred at night about him, Woth did not know or care. What terrible voices of lost souls might have muttered about his tree, did not interest him. Swiftly he made a meal of bat meat and fruit, and went on through the jungle paths towards his native city hidden deep in the unknown interior of Ild

Chundarath many days away.

**T**WO DAYS HAD passed. He was far from Oo and far from any known land. Woth was hurrying swiftly along an animal trail under the shade of the great trees. He came to a part that crossed an open stretch upon which the hot light of the clouds flowed uninterrupted. As he was about to step out into the open, he saw something move in the green on the other side of the space. Accustomed to the natural inhabitants of the fernforests, he recognized instantly the presence of man. Woth dodged back.

Nothing showed itself on the other side. He waited. Now his ears caught a sound. He looked behind him. There was someone coming along his trail. He watched hidden. In a few minutes, he saw three men come into view. Short and plump they were, dressed in queer robes such as were worn in only one place. And all three were smiling. Woth cast a glance at the other side of the clearing. Sure enough, three other men had stepped out. Also short and plump and smiling broadly.

Woth stared aghast. They must have followed him all the way and trapped him neatly. They could easily have passed him, he saw, since they could use the river and streams and take advantage of the few inhabitants. Woth swore strange weird oaths under his breath.

The men began to advance to where he lay hidden. Woth took out the tiny miniature of Noom made of the priceless glowing lynquar, and giving it a last look, placed it in his mouth. He leered through the foliage at his pursuers, and then, with a violent effort, swallowed the gem.

He proceeded to step out onto the path in plain view. He looked at the newcomers and removing his skull cap made a sweeping bow.

The six men from Oo looked at him and seemed to smile even more broadly. Woth smiled back

at them and queried in a friendly manner.

"Ah, good men, what do you want of me? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The little men smiled even more than before, if that were possible, and one said pleasantly.

"We were searching for a little ornament that has disappeared from Noom the perfect. Do you know ought of it?"

The man from Druun returned his smile and said blandly:

"Would that I could help you, sirs, but alas I cannot. I have not seen it."

The leader answered: "We shall have to continue our search then. May we come along with you, for we are not experienced jungle travellers?"

"Most certainly" answered Woth not in the least perturbed. "I should be delighted to have you with me."

They took up their journey together. The little men were very jolly and Woth was eternally jesting with them and asking about their God. He thought of an amusing notion and asked them.

"If it is true that none but Noom can do anything perfectly, then how could you ever find the one who made off with that which you seek? For would that not be bringing your quest to a perfect conclusion, which would be blasphemous?"

The little men laughed queerly and replied,

"Oh, *we* will never complete our search. But Noom will. The Perfect God will exact his own punishment and deliver the evil-doer into our hand."

Woth smiled to himself and thought of how easy it would be to do away with these foolish men in the night. He wished it were dark already so that he might do it and go to sleep. For he felt very weary and his legs dragged heavily.

In a few hours he was feeling exhausted and dull. The gem seemed to lie on his stomach and grow and grow. His joints

were becoming unusually stiff and painful.

When night came, he was able to stagger to a rest, and fell asleep instantly, deciding to put off his task till the morrow.

The next day he felt even queerer. He had little inclination to keep on, and felt decidedly heavier and stiffer. His head was very dizzy and sunk into his shoulders. The stone in his insides seemed to be stifling him. He felt himself visibly shrinking. The little men about him never seemed to take notice of his strange illness but always their smiles grew broader.

Towards mid-day Woth was unable to continue. He lay down in the soft underbrush and the little fat men stood around and stared at him. Woth saw their grins grow and spread, and then finally, as a sickly coldness came over him, noticed them laugh outright.

**B**EFORE THE temple of Noom in the city of Oo on the banks of the River Zoon sits a man. He is small and fat and he watches with his strange smile the people going in and out of the Temple of the Perfect One. And sometimes when he sees somebody that is tall and thin, he laughs to himself and glances, still chuckling, to a place inside the temple.

There along the wall, one among many others, stands a small stone statue. It is an effigy of Noom carved out of a single priceless lynquar gem. It is as large as an ordinary man and quite an excellent representation of the squat god of Oo. But like all things in that city, it, too, is unfinished. For where there should be twinkling stone eyes, there gleam forth two black human orbs that stare with an unearthly horror out at the scene before it. And if you place your ear to the hard stone sides you may hear a dull thumping as if of a heart beating eternally in the interior.