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DEDICATION

Dedicated to L. Sprague DeCamp, colleague, collaborator and friend.

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A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

This was my first book. That is, although it was the seventh novel I wrote, it was the first one to find a publisher. It appeared in March, 1965—which was not so very long ago, when you stop to think about it—and although there have been something like twenty-five books bearing my name since then, I retain a warm, affectionate nostalgia for this one, which was the first of them all.

It was also the first novel about Thongor the Mighty, barbarian warrior hero of Lost Lemuria. There have been many Thongor novels since then, and the intrepid Valkartian has been lucky enough to make many friends and to find many enthusiastic readers. A considerable number of these good people came to the series rather late and have written to me asking where they could find copies of the first couple of novels in the saga of Thongor. All I could do was to refer them to the publisher.

But now it has been suggested that this first Thongor book be reprinted so that the many latecomers among Thongor's friends could read of his earliest adventures. I have heartily endorsed this suggestion, because many sharp-eyed Thongorian scholars have called to my attention certain errors which crept into the original edition through my own carelessness, and a second edition gives me the chance to correct these unfortunate mistakes.

I have taken the liberty of restoring to the text certain passages which the editor cut out of the first edition, and I have somewhat rewritten certain portions of the book so that it now conforms in every detail with particulars described in later books of the series. I have also added a few thousand words of new material by way of an afterthought.

It is not every author who gets a second chance at his first book, as it were: thus I am grateful for this opportunity to revise and touch

up some of the rougher spots herein. I am also grateful for this opportunity to thank the many hundreds of readers who have been kind enough to write during these past five years, telling me how much they enjoy my Lemurian books. I cannot mention them all by name, but I take this opportunity to issue personal thanks to a few who were among the first Thongor fans. Thank you, George Heap, Frank Price, Lloyd Alexander, Gray Morrow, David Hull, Robert Magy, Miles Eaton, John Jakes, and “Argee.”

I am happy to repeat the original dedication of this novel to L. Sprague de Camp. Years ago, when I was just another fan who wanted to be a writer, he had the extraordinary kindness to read this novel in manuscript and give me a copiously detailed critique of it. Thanks again, Sprague!

—LIN CARTER

Holilis, Long Island, New York

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AN INTRODUCTION

The Legend of Lost Lemuria

Before Egypt and Babylon were, Sumer and Akkad rose in the Land Between the Rivers, and before these the secret of Man's beginnings are lost in the dim haze of prehistory whereof we know but little.

But for thousands of years now, the sages and philosophers, the wise men and the tellers-of-tales, have whispered of unknown and mythic realms which flourished in Time's Dawn. From the writings of the ancient Greeks the glittering name of Atlantis has come down to us, and in the mysterious books of the occult is whispered the legend of primal Mu, or Lemuria, which arose, they say, before even the glory of Atlantis was born.

Half a million years ago, the old legends say, the first civilizations of Man came into being on the lost and prehistoric continent of Lemuria somewhere in the vast waters of the Pacific. Up from the crimson murk of barbarism Mankind lifted the bright banners of its first kingdoms. Science calls this remote era the middle of the Pleistocene Epoch. In this period, between 1,000,000 and 25,000 B.C., which was the Ice Age, mammals rose to dominate the world and the Age of the Reptiles was done. Mastodon and saber-toothed tiger, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon Man, and a host of other forms of early life arose, and the Neolithic Age was born...

Perhaps this was true of prehistoric Europe during the middle Pleistocene, but among the tropic jungles and steaming swamps and thundering volcanoes of primal Lemuria, the Age of Reptiles lingered awhile. Still the mighty dinosaur shook the earth beneath his

ponderous tread; still the fantastic pterodactyl winged through the misty skies of the Dawn Age.

The legend records that when the Gods created Man, the Lost Continent was still dominated by the mysterious Dragon Kings, fled hither from the destruction of Hyperborea. The warriors of Man's first kingdoms fought against the Dragon Kings in a titanic, age-long struggle known as The Thousand-Year War. By its end the Dragon Kings were destroyed or driven into hiding, and the Age of Men began.

The children of *Nemedis*, the First Kingdom, spread over the Lost Continent—over the vast, untamed jungles and across the huge mountains of elder Lemuria. Kingdoms were founded...and fought...and fell. But the march of civilization had begun, and ere long the Golden Empire of the Sun would arise to draw these first few warring kingdoms beneath one mighty banner.

It was an age of war, when brave men and beautiful women, savages and sages, wizards and warriors struggled to carve a red path that led to the Throne of the World. It was an age of heroic legends, too.

And this is one of them.

CHAPTER 1

Red Swords in Thurdis

*All day our swords drank deep and long
Of blood wine-red, of blood wine-strong!
Tonight in the red halls of hell
We'll feast with foes and friends as well!*

—War Song of the Valkarthan Swordsmen

Thongor of Valkarath ducked as the heavy wine goblet hurled harmlessly over his head, ringing against the wall and splattering cold wine over his face and naked chest. He blinked the cold, stinging fluid from his eyes expressionlessly.

Jeled Malkh, the otar who had flung the goblet, threw back his head and laughed.

“That is how a noble of Thurdis treats a nameless dog of a mercenary!” he sneered to his companions. They echoed his laughter.

“Pity to waste good sarn-wine,” one remarked wittily. “Cheap ale of the Northlands is more his drink!”

Jeled Malkh shrugged. “Imagine the lout daring to ask for the payment of his wager—and from the otar of his own hundred!”

The cold sarn-wine dripped down Thongor’s mighty chest. He continued to regard the officer. His dark, tanned face was without expression, but those who knew him well could have read the cold glint in the strange golden eyes of the silent barbarian from the Northlands of Lemuria. With one hand he brushed the wine from his face, tossing back his long mane of black hair. He addressed Jeled Malkh quietly.

“You refuse, then, to pay the wager?”

“Yes, I refuse! The zamph with red trappings would have won easily enough, had not that fool Var Tajas ridden him so incompetently. I was cheated!”

Thongor nodded. “Very well then, Otar, I withdraw my claim. Moreover, I will even repay you for the goblet of wine you wasted upon this dog of a mercenary, who is indeed, as your friend said, more used to the thin ale of the Northlands than the scented puke you Thurdans call sarn.”

While the group of officers gaped with astonishment, the giant Valkarthan moved. With one stride he stepped before the otar, picked him up, turned him head-down, and pushed his face up to the ears in the great bronze wine bowl. He held the noble’s head under, ignoring his kicks and writhings. When he released him again, Jeled Malkh slumped over the table, white-faced beneath dripping wine, gasping for breath.

In the astounded silence, Thongor laughed.

“Aye, I hold no grudge, Otar. And I have even given you a bigger drink of wine than you gave me!”

Sobbing with rage, Jeled Malkh whipped out his blade and plunged it across the table at Thongor’s naked breast.

The giant Northlander sprang backward lightly, his own great broadsword hissing from its scabbard. The officers scattered as the two blades flashed and rang. The combatants circled about the table, feeling out with delicate steel the firmness of each other’s guard.

Although a grim smile played about his lips, Thongor was inwardly cursing. Gorm take his hot Valkarthan temper! He was a thrice-damned fool to pick a duel with his own captain. But he was in it now and could not easily get out.

Steel rang against steel as the barbarian mercenary and the jeweled scion of the noblest house in all Thurdis fought. Jeled Malkh was no mean swordsman. His education as only heir to the House of Malkh had brought him under the tutelage of the most famed sword masters in all the realm. But Thongor of Valkarh had virtually been born with a broadsword in his hand. In the years of his wanderings

and wars as a vagabond, hired assassin, thief, and now mercenary, he had learned every trick of swordplay with every type of weapon.

He toyed with Jeled Malkh for a while, just long enough to please the otar's self-esteem—then, with a clever twist of the wrist, disarmed him. The rapier rang on the stone flags of the barracks.

The otar's hand snaked for the hilt, but Thongor's booted foot came down on the blade of the weapon.

“Shall we not end it here, Otar? And cool our tempers while we drink a cup of wine? Come! I acknowledge my hot-headed temper—let us be friends.”

Jeled Malkh's thin lips writhed back in a snarl.

“Dog of a Northlander bitch! I'll cut out your putrid heart and feed it to my zamph for this insult!”

The otar spat in his face and thudded one knee into Thongor's groin. The Valkarthan sagged against the table, clutching his gut. In a flash the otar snatched up his sword and sprang upon him. The table went over with a crash. The great bronze wine bowl clanged on the stone floor, splattering them all.

Now Thongor was angry. A familiar red haze thickened before his strange golden eyes, and his teeth were bared in a fighting smile. His mighty broadsword battered the slim Southland blade aside and he set his point against Jeled Malkh's panting breast.

“Enough, I say! An end, or I'll spit you on my steel!”

The heir of Malkh paled. He licked cold lips. The Valkarthan applied a slight pressure. The point broke skin and drew a scarlet thread down the otar's breast.

“P-peace, then,” Jeled Malkh gasped.

“You swear it?”

“It is sworn!”

Thongor put up his sword and extended his hand for the grip of peace. But the proud noble could never accept defeat from one of his own swordsmen. He seized Thongor's wrist, set his foot behind his heel, and twisted suddenly. The giant barbarian crashed to the floor and Jeled Malkh's slim blade flashed toward his throat.

Thongor smashed the blade aside with one arm, ignoring the needle of cold fire that ripped his flesh. He sprang catlike to his feet, and before his opponent could regain his stance, the great Valkar-than broadsword had sunk to its hilt in his heart.

Jeled Malkli swayed, mouth open, gasping. His eyes goggled, glazing, staring blankly down at the sword hilt protruding from his chest. With one strengthless hand he plucked feebly at the hilt. Then his knees buckled. A gush of blood flooded from his open mouth, and he sprawled to the floor at Thongor's feet—dead.

The mercenary set his heel against the corpse's belly and tugged the sword free, wiping it dry on the dead man's cloak. Holding it, he glanced about the room at the white faces. No one dared to speak. He shrugged, and slid the weapon back in its scabbard.

A sandal rasped against the floor behind him. But before Thongor could turn, a heavy cudgel crashed against his skull. He fell face-forward into a sea of blackness.

Thongor awoke groggily with an ache in his skull. He was shackled to the wet stone wall of a dungeon cell, far below the citadel of Thurdis. Through a trap in the ceiling a lonely beam of sunlight fell slanting, and from its angle he estimated he had been unconscious somewhat less than an hour. It was now an hour before sunset, or thereabouts.

He examined his chains and found them too strong for even his giant strength to break. Then he simply shrugged, with the fatalistic philosophy of the North that wastes no time worrying over what cannot be helped. He was a trifle surprised to find himself still alive. Jeled Malkh's friends and co-officers could well have put an end to him with one stroke of a dirk while he had been unconscious. A slight, grim smile touched his lips. Doubtless the prospect of seeing him chained to the oar benches of a Thurdan galley for the rest of his life, or watching him fed to the Sark's private garden of vampiric slith-flowers appealed more to their cultured cruelty and sadism than dispatching him cleanly with the stroke of a knife.

His scabbard, of course, was empty, and he became increasingly aware of another emptiness, that of his belly. About this time of the day he was used to a tankard of sour ale and a roast boughar haunch, which he was accustomed to share with Ald Turmis and his other comrades at the Inn of the Drawn Sword. *Well, what you want in this life you must try to get*, he thought to himself.

He bellowed until the jailer came shuffling, fat-bellied and smelling of dream lotus, to the door of the cell. He peered in at the half-naked bronze giant chained to the wall.

“What do you want?”

“Something to eat,” Thongor said. The fat jailer gaped, then snorted with laughter.

“Food, eh? Within the hour you go before the daotar to be judged for killing your commander—and all you can think of is something to fill your belly! Perhaps you would like a banquet served to you from the Sark’s kitchens?”

Thongor grinned. “Why not? I did the city a service in ridding it of a cheat, a coward, and a bad officer. Both the daotar and Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurdis, should reward me for that.”

The jailer snorted. “Aye, Northlander, they’ll reward you all right—by feeding your heart to the slith! Know you not that the daotar of the guards, the noble Barand Thon, is the oldest friend of the father of the man you slew? Aye! We’ll watch you wriggling while the vampire-flowers devour your flesh—that will be your reward!”

“That may be as it will,” Thongor grunted. “But it does not change the fact that I am hungry. Before they feed me to the slith, at least let them feed me!”

The jailer grunted with annoyance, but shuffled off, to return a few moments later with a jug of sour, cheap wine and a meat stew. He let himself into the cell and set them down before the Valkarthan.

“Your chains are long enough to reach that,” he wheezed. “Yell when you are through—and by the Gods, be certain you are through before the daotar’s men come to drag you off for trial. I don’t want my superiors to think I coddle scum like you!”

The chains were indeed long enough, and Thongor devoured the stew hungrily and tossed down the cheap wine in two huge gulps. He could always think better with a full belly, and now that his hunger was appeased he began to search his wits for a way out of this predicament. He had been in—and out—of the prisons of a dozen cities in his career, and he knew as many ways to escape. His first thought was to slump back against the stone wall as if asleep, and when the jailer came to collect the bowls, to seize him with his unchained legs and force him to surrender the keys.

He examined this plan for a time, and then discarded it in favor of another. If his chains were long enough to allow him to reach the food on the floor, they were long enough to gather a heavy length into one hand and smash the jailer over the head with. At least it was worth a try. Thongor had served on the galleys of the sadistic Sark of Shembis at one time, and had no desire to slave thus again.

He yelled for the jailer, saying his meal was done, and gathered a long strand of the iron chain into one hand. The sun was setting now, and the long shaft of rose light was almost gone. The cell was gradually filling up with darkness, and Thongor thought it likely the fat jailer would not see the handful of chains. He yelled out again... and then his alert senses detected swift, light footsteps approaching down the corridor. The clank of a key in the lock, and the door screeched open. The cell was so dark by now that Thongor could not even see the jailer's face as the man entered the cell; therefore his ruse would doubtless work.

He watched the dark figure as it glided near, and along his deep chest and broad shoulders, giant thews swelled and tensed, ready to crush the guard's skull to gory ruin with one terrific blow from the dangling length of heavy chain that hung in his hands.

"Thongor?"

The Valkarthan grunted in astonishment.

"Is that you, against the wall? Thongor? It is I—Aid Turmis."

The bronzed giant relaxed. "Gorm Almighty, I had broken your skull in another instant, had you not spoken when you did! What in the name of a thousand devils are *you* doing here?"

His friend chuckled softly. “Did you think I would let these Thurdan swine send you to the galleys without lifting a hand? Besides, it’s far from being the first time we’ve helped one another break out of jail—remember Zangabal, and the house Athmar Phong? But here, we’re wasting time with words. I took the key and brought along your sword. Quickly!”

Thongor grinned. Aid Turmis—although a thin-blooded Thurdan like all the rest and filled with Southlander sentiments about peace and comfort—was every inch a fighting man. He remembered their first meeting some eight months ago—also in a prison cell, in Zangabal across the Patangan Gulf from here. Down on his luck, Thongor had turned thief, and a scheming priest had cajoled him into robbing the house of a mighty Ptarthan sorcerer. What the priest had not told him was that he was not the first to enter the wizard’s house on burglar’s business. Thus had he come upon his woeful predecessor, Aid Turmis, languishing in chains. Together they had fled, after a night of horror and doom wherein the house of the Ptarthan sorcerer was transformed into a blazing inferno. And they had been together ever since, fighting comrades in the mercenary legions of Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurid. And to think that Thongor had come within a hair’s breadth of bashing in his best friend’s skull with a length of chain!

These memories flashed through the giant barbarian’s mind as the lithe young Thurdan busied himself with the lock. Now it occurred to him to ask, “How did you come by the key to my chains?”

Aid Turmis smiled—a flash of white teeth in the gloom. “The jailer, in his present condition, had no conceivable use for them, so I borrowed them for a time.”

“Well, I hope it was not needful to slay the fat oaf. He fed me well; I’ll give him that.”

His friend laughed. “Just like a Northlander barbarian—always thinking of your belly! Nay, fear not; the fellow is merely enjoying an unexpected nap at the moment, from which he will awaken with a bad headache, I fear, but at least he will awaken. Damn lock...ah, there!”