

Gullivar Jones' Homecoming

The village was ancient. Once, it had borne a name, but that had long since been forgotten. For its inhabitants, it was known simply as Nûr-*home*.

It had existed for thousands of years under the rays of the Sun, protected by the shadows of the Nihan peaks, lying on the eastern reaches of the Desert of Tears. Its adobe houses nestled in the cracks of the rock, hiding its people from even the rare traffic of the caravan trail that traveled along the Nihan northward towards Edora and south to the land of the Malachites. Only its mighty aeyries, home to flocks of eagles, proud, jagged needles of rock jutting against the sky, betrayed its presence to the observant traveler.

Although the season of mists was barely over, and summer was still many moons distant, that morning burned hot as the stones of the baker's oven. Nature remained silent in the heat, not betraying itself by wind or buzzing insect or beating of wings.

Yet man was not silent.

The evil cacophony of murder shimmered hotter than the Sun.

The village was dying.

Troops of azure-clad soldiers ran through its streets like an invading army of ants, spilling blood in their wake. Smoke rose from houses put to the torch; the crackling of the flames mingled with the wails of women and the dying cries of men. The acrid stench of blood permeated ancient streets, which had previously only been washed by the rarest of winter rains. Carnage fed upon itself and grew like some great, bloated beast.

The village's defenders fought bravely, but in vain against an overwhelming force.

Bodies sprawled, left to become fodder for flies, worms and the grim, black muru birds. The invaders moved deeper into the village, an unstoppable force, exacting a terrible price on whoever stood in their way.

In the center of the village stood a building larger than the others, made of carved greystones that had been painfully extracted from the Nihan and hauled down their narrow trails. It was not an ostentatious building, as temples in the big cities often are; through the patina of its ancient stones, it bore witness to centuries of humble devotion. The slow passage of time had worn its once elaborate carvings into gently rounded shapes, yet still recognizable images of eagles could be seen in their smoothness.

Heaving and puffing, the brutish invaders launched themselves with a wooden battering ram at bronze doors not meant to ward off such hostility. The sound of the shattering of the metal gates echoed throughout the village like a gong of doom, and for an all too brief moment, managed to drown out the cries of the dying and the obscenely victorious shouts of the blue-clad warriors.

They rushed into the temple, dealing deadly blows to those few acolytes who tried in vain to bar their way. Inside, all was cool and dark, but not the oppressive darkness of the tomb, rather the friendly hearth-like atmosphere of the last hours of a summer's night.

Having secured the great hall, the invaders roughly pushed and dragged the bodies of the acolytes aside to make room for he who followed them: their master.

The Unholy One walked tall and silent, dressed in an ornately decorated azure cloak, through the paved streets of the village. His chalk-white face looked ancient, yet ageless. Strange energies seemed to lurk behind his pitch-black eyes. Even the bravest of soldiers averted their gaze at their master's passing; none but the eyes of the dead dared stare at him.

Behind him walked a squadron of elite, blue-garbed warriors, led by a gaunt, silent, zombie-like wraith, clothed in scarlet tatters, and whose skull-like face was hidden deep inside a cowl. The One in Blue arrived before the desecrated temple. He took account of its bronze gates torn from their hinges and surveyed the carnage. With grim pleasure he beheld the blood of the dead as it slowly seeped, drenching the courtyard, and the smoking ruins of what had once been a thriving marketplace.

“It is indeed the Hour of Darkness,” he said with satisfaction, before brazenly stepping into the temple.

At the sound of his steps, the soldiers stood to attention, letting their fearsome leader and his followers pass by.

The One in Blue quickly made his way to the inner sanctum of the temple. There, in front of him, stood a golden-skinned woman, with green eyes and long, jet-black tresses, dressed in ancient ceremonial robes and holding a staff. Her name was Princess Heru. She was the last of the Kings and Queens of the Golden Race, who could trace their line to the Time of the Great Fear and before.

Behind her, huddling in terror, were a group of wise men and women, also dressed in ceremonial attire, and their vestals, young women dressed in white.

“Rodrik-Usher,” spat Heru. “Rodrik-Usher of Seth. Rodrik-Usher the Damned.”

Rodrik-Usher roughly pushed the Princess aside, as he would brush away a fly. The woman fell to the ground and was quickly attended by a vestal. Behind Heru were three well-worn stone steps that led to a small altar. On the altar was a tabernacle. In the cities of the south, such a place would have been enshrined in gold and alabaster. Here, only wood and the lovingly carved greystone from the Nihan housed the villagers’ holiest treasure.

Rodrik-Usher climbed the steps and opened the tabernacle. Inside was a glowing shard of blue crystal, held delicately by a golden bird claw.

“The Blue Shard!” he whispered in a low, angry voice that did not need to be raised to be heard throughout the room. He looked at it with envy and naked greed. “At long last. Stolen from me by that fat pig, Montessor, and his wench, Ligeia. Here. In this miserable village forsaken by all.”

“May the Keepers curse you forever, Rodrik-Usher!” said Heru.

Rodrik-Usher laughed, an evil, self-assured laugh, his ageless face cracking wide in an expression of malignant mirth.

“I am beyond curses, Princess,” he said. “Especially those issued by one as weak as you.”

The One in Blue stretched his hands forward to grab the Shard from the tabernacle. But as they touched the stone, there was a burst of sharp, blue fire and it exploded, shattering into microscopic fragments that evaporated like snowflakes in the sunlight.

The evil Enchanter screamed in anguished pain. His face became contorted with suffering, fury and impotent rage. He raised his hands, which were now black, charred and smoking. The smell of burning flesh filled the hall.

“Montessor!” Rodrik-Usher shouted. “He’s the only one capable of doing this!”

The sorcerer then turned to the scarlet, wraith-like figure that had been standing motionless and silent at the altar’s feet.

“Andrevar! My Red Death! Go seek him out! He must be hiding somewhere in this thrice-accursed village. Find him and kill him!”

The creature that Rodrik-Usher had called Andrevar, and who had himself once been a mighty Enchanter of Seth, but was now known among men only as the Red Death, nodded silently, and left, striding from the temple trailing a cloud of fear.

Outside, the blue-garbed soldiers gave wide berth to the Red Death as they saw him emerge from the holy place. They feared Rodrik-Usher, but were terrified of the Red Death. The grim figure stood for a moment, amidst the dead bodies, sniffing the air like a hound searching for the odor of its prey in its currents.

The Red Death strode purposefully through the blood-soaked streets, moving unerringly towards an unremarkable adobe house.

Inside a man and a young woman waited. The man was short and portly. His face was rubicund and jolly, and would have resembled that of a contented baby were it not for the air of intense concentration it bore. He was dressed in blue and yellow robes that had once glowed in the sunlight, but were now dull and used. Virtually all adepts of the ancient arts would have immediately recognized him as Montessor, the notorious Enchanter of Seth, whose prowess was legendary from the Manses of Denay to the shores of the Sarkean Sea.

The young woman was his pupil. Her name was Ligeia, and she, too, was an Enchanter of Seth. She was slender and beautiful, with flowing black hair and sparkling violet eyes, and was also dressed in a blue garment.

Montessor and Ligeia had just finished performing a magic ritual in front of a small tripod brazier. The Enchanter wiped his brow, then rubbed his hands in glee, and added with a mischievous look: "Well, well. That should teach Rodrik-Usher not to put his hands where they don't belong. I'm so glad we thought of boobytrapping the Shard."

But his satisfaction was short-lived as, suddenly, the Red Death kicked down the door of the house and rushed in.

A man of Montessor's experience was not easily taken by surprise. The Enchanter turned around and made a magical gesture. A rainbow hued, flaring burst of light sprung from thin air and stopped the wraith dead in his tracks.

Montessor took advantage of those few seconds to grab Ligeia by the hand.

"Come, my dear. We have overstayed our welcome."

Dragging her with him, he ran through a backdoor hidden by a curtain.

Their flight did not go unnoticed

The Red Death had recovered swiftly from Montessor's bit of magical trickery and lunged after them. He was soon in close pursuit.

As the fugitives ran through the village streets, soldiers recognized them and joined the hunt. Despite the Enchanter's portly nature, neither Montessor nor Ligeia slowed their pace and thus, they managed to stay ahead of their pursuers, nimbly evading them in the maze-like network of cobbled streets that comprised the upper part of the village. Had there been living observers, they would soon have realized that this was not mere flight, but that instead the runners moved with a sense of purpose, in a particular direction, towards a precise goal...

Indeed, they eventually reached what at first glance appeared to be an exitless alley, squeezed between the steep and windowless walls of three mundane houses. The only noticeable exceptions to this featureless cul-de-sac were two intricately carved totems on the stone wall that closed off the alley.

Montessor made several magical passes in the air, his hands moving easily in rhythm with the humming of a spell song.

Suddenly, a portal of light appeared between the two carvings. The Enchanter addressed Ligeia. "This is the Gate of Lu-Pov, our last hope. This leads to the Other World. Through space *and* time. You realize what this means, my dear?"

"Everything that was precious to me has already been destroyed by Rodrik-Usher, Montessor. I welcome this. So be it," responded the young woman, grimly.

Ligeia stepped decisively through the shimmering portal of light and vanished.

At that same moment, the Red Death, leading a mob of bloodthirsty soldiers, entered the cul-de-sac. The wraith was barely in time to see Ligeia, already almost entirely through the Gate, and Montessor, waving an ironic farewell with his hand, stepping through in her wake.

"Tell Rodrik-Usher good-bye, Andrevar," he said to the Red Death. "At least, he won't have to worry about biting his fingernails for a while!"

Then, Montessor, too, disappeared into the Gate, which vanished, restoring the stone wall to its initial, blank form.

The wraith stood there, silently, no longer able to obey his Master's commands. The soldiers milled about helplessly, unsure as to what course of action they should take. Suddenly, the crowd of armed men split to let Rodrik-Usher through, followed by more blue-clad soldiers, dragging and pushing the hapless Princess Heru and the other elders and vestals from the temple.

Unhurriedly, Rodrik-Usher examined the two totems, paying special attention to the carvings. He traced them with his charred, blackened fingers, causing bits of carbonized flesh to fall off, revealing the bleached bone beneath, and seemed not the least bit surprised by what he saw.

"I would have preferred to destroy Montessor myself, but it is good to have him gone in whatever fashion it takes," he said at last. "I will make sure that he can never return..."

Then, he turned towards the soldiers, and indicated the elders and the women.

"Kill them. Eradicate them all. I want this village drowned in blood."

As Rodrik-Usher walked away without looking back, the horrid sounds of hacking blades and gut-wrenching screams filled the alley, until silence once again returned.

As the Sun set over Nûr, the azure-clad soldiers began to leave in a single file, walking towards the Desert of Tears. Only the dead, and the screeching, scavenging birds, remained as ghastly witnesses to the carnage they had left in their wake.

Gullivar Jones had flown along the caravan trail on his magic carpet. During his stops, he had earned his meals by playing music and telling stories to the merchants, as they traveled south, their wagons loaded with precious skins, rare herbs and other goods that would fetch much gold in the land of the Malachites, beyond the great Desert of Tears. The tales they most enjoyed were about the Blue Star, Earth, the world upon which he had been born—or *would be born*, someday far in the future.

Eventually, Gullivar had bidden farewell to the caravan leader, resisting the old man's entreaties and promises of a bonus for more stories of the Wild West and the great Buffalo Hunter whose name was "Bill." He had flown off towards the foot of the mountains, before the great stretch of desert beyond.

He had found his way along a series of narrow canyons, carefully flying his carpet between the sharp cliffs and rocky spires that made this part of the Nihan Mountains nearly inaccessible. It had been many months since he had flown through these gorges, yet he had never forgotten the way.

Gullivar Jones was going home. Or at least, to the only home that now truly mattered for him.

He flew onward and upward towards the village of Nûr, reflecting on the failure of his mission, despite the many obstacles he had overcome during his wanderings. As he approached the village, his eyes noticed the circling black muru birds in the skies above.

Gullivar's heart leapt to his throat, but resisting the urge to rush forward, the Earthman immediately flew lower and landed behind a cliff. He dismounted and cautiously made his way to the village through a rocky shortcut.

Then, he beheld the horror.

Gullivar slowly walked through the corpse-littered streets, his face becoming increasingly grim as he realized the absence of survivors. Still, he progressed cautiously in case the attackers had left men behind. It seemed that there was no one left alive in the entire village.

His steps took him to the alley where Heru's body lay among those of her companions, in a pool of blood. Miraculously, faint breath still emanated from the woman's lips.

Gently cradling the body in his arms, Gullivar dropped some essence of germande that he had brought with him into the dying Princess' mouth. Returned to dim consciousness, Heru opened her eyes, recognized the Earthman who was also her lover, and whispered one name—that of Rodrik-Usher the Damned.

The small effort had taken her last breath, and she died in Gullivar's arms, staring up into his face.

The warrior stood and released a long, bestial scream that plaintively spoke of his grief, pain and fury.

With Many Cares & Toils Oppres'd...

Letter from Edgar Allan Poe to John Allan, March 19, 1827:

Richmond, Monday

Sir,

After my treatment on yesterday and what passed between us this morning, I can hardly think you will be surprised at the contents of this letter. My determination is at length taken to leave your house and endeavor to find some place in this wide world, where I will be treated not as you have treated me. This is not a hurried determination, but one on which I have long considered—and having so considered my resolution is unalterable. You may perhaps think that I have flown off in a passion, & that I am already wishing to return; but not so. I will give you the reasons which have actuated me, and then judge—

Since I have been able to think on any subject, my thoughts have aspired, and they have been taught by you to aspire, to eminence in public life; this cannot be attained without a good education, such a one I cannot obtain at a Primary school. A collegiate education therefore was what I most ardently desired, and I had been led to expect that it would at some future time be granted, but in a moment of caprice you have blasted my hopes because forsooth I disagreed with you in an opinion, which opinion I was forced to express. Again, I have heard you say (when you little thought I was listening and therefore must have said it in earnest) that you had no affection for me—

You have moreover ordered me to quit your house, and are continually upbraiding me with eating the bread of Idleness, when you yourself were the only person to remedy the evil by placing me to some business. You take delight in exposing me before those whom you think likely to advance my interest in this world.

These grievances I could not submit to; and I am gone. I request that you will send me my trunk containing my clothes & books—and if you still have the least affection for me, as the last call I shall make on your bounty, to prevent the fulfillment of the prediction you this morning expressed, send me as much money as will defray the expenses of my passage to some of the Northern cities & then support me for one month, by which time I shall be enabled to place myself in some situation where I may not only obtain a livelihood, but lay by a sum which one day or another will support me at the University.

Send my trunk to the Court House Tavern; send me I entreat you some money immediately, as I am in the greatest necessity. If you fail to comply with my request, I tremble for the consequence.

Yours &c

Edgar A. Poe

Letter from Edgar Allan Poe to John Allan, March 20, 1827:

Richmond Monday

Sir,

Be so good as to send me my trunk with my clothes. I wrote to you on yesterday explaining my reasons for leaving. I suppose by my not receiving either my trunk, or an answer to my letter, that you did not receive it. I am in the greatest necessity, not having tasted food since yesterday morning. I have nowhere to sleep at night, but roam about the streets. I am nearly exhausted. I beseech you as you wish not your prediction concerning me to be fulfilled to send me without delay my trunk containing my clothes, and to lend if you will not give me as much money as will defray the expense of my passage to Boston and a little to support me there until I shall be enabled to engage in some business. I sail on Saturday. A letter will be received by me at the Court House Tavern, where be so good as to send my trunk.

I am Yours &c.

Edgar A. Poe

P.S.: I have not one cent in the world to provide any food.

Baltimore was to many people like a lighted candle to the moth, reflected Poe. Year after year, they were attracted to it in swarms; filled with the vague idea that they could get along as well here as anywhere, since, as many put it, something was *bound to turn up*. Most were, like him, young men unsettled in life, fresh from good homes, with sincere hopes of getting a start in the city and making something of themselves.

Alas, few of them had money to waste while accomplishing this, and thus they naturally gravitated to the egalitarian heart of the city, the cheap lodging-houses that provided the only rooms they could afford.

As the 18-year-old walked through the back alleys, he passed a horde of dirty children playing in the gutter; the worn, grey, greasy walls muffled their shouts, almost as if the street itself was apologizing for their small moment of joy. Few happy noises made this neighborhood sing. Morning and evening, it echoed with the groans of endless toil and the rumbling of the passing carts. Only a year earlier, a colony of blind beggars had found harbor within its dark burrows, tenants of a peg-legged landlord, whom every child in the neighborhood knew, even if he had no idea that John Quincy Adams was President of the United States.

Despite the bleakness of his surroundings, something to which he was quite accustomed, Poe was in good spirits. He was a handsome, lanky young man of strong constitution, brimming with energy. His ample forehead, dark hair, burning dark eyes and proud bearing made him a distinctive, unusual figure in the bowels of the city. His cheerful manner was due to having heard of a new literary opportunity a few weeks earlier from his brother Henry. He hoped that it might, if only temporarily, resolve the matter of his gambling debts.

After the death of their parents, Henry, or as he had been christened, William Henry Leonard, had had the luck, or so it seemed to Poe, to have been allowed to remain with their grandparents. He, however, had been adopted by the reprehensible John Francis Allan, who had done his best to keep the two boys separated, including writing his brother a letter three years earlier in which he threatened to disclose a scandal about their mother.

But Allan had failed, and Poe had met his brother in Richmond during the summer of 1825 and had even introduced him to his darling Elmira. Their common dislike of Mr. Allan had only served to draw the brothers closer together.

Since the death of their grandfather nine years prior, Henry had been living with the Clemm family. Then, soon after Poe's visit, Henry had embarked on the *U.S.S. Macedonian* (his uniform had greatly impressed Elmira, Poe recalled), and had visited South America.

He had just returned to Baltimore and, eager to publish accounts of his journeys, had made contact with a newly launched weekly magazine, rather ambitiously called *The North American*, not to be confused with the more prestigious *North American Review* in Boston. Not only had its editor been willing to print his articles, but he had actually offered Henry a modest, but nevertheless genuine, advance. According to Henry, he had also expressed interest in a story entitled *The Pirate*, inspired by Poe's brief affair with Elmira, and on which the two brothers had collaborated.

Encouraged by this response, Poe had quickly gathered as much material as he had, mostly poems, and presented them as best as he could. He had also enlisted the help of a kindly neighbor to clean and press his rumpled suit and shirt in an effort to impress the *North American* editor. At last he had set off carrying a black leather portfolio filled with his ink-covered pages beneath his arm.

Spring had been early that year. It was another blandly beautiful day. The air was neither too hot nor too cold, even in breezy downtown, and Poe felt as if the wind itself was carrying him on his way, so light was his mood.

When the aspiring writer at last arrived at the offices of *The North American*, his buoyancy faded and he suddenly felt as if his nerves were on fire. What would he do if he were to be rejected? *Best not think that now*, he told himself. And, swallowing hard, he pushed open the heavy wooden door of the entryway.

The North American was located on the fifth floor of the building. Even though the day was not hot, by the time Poe had climbed what he soon perceived as a never-ending staircase, he was covered in sweat. This did nothing to improve his mood as he tapped on the door to the editor's office.

A jovial voice bade him enter, and after a brief hesitation, he walked through the door.

The office was astonishingly chaotic; papers were stacked on every surface, practically hiding the dark, heavy furniture. From the desk, a disembodied voice welcomed Poe. It took the young man a second or two to find its source behind the piles of manuscripts that hid its owner.

"Are you Alexander Montessor?" he asked the short, portly man with the jolly, rubicund face that looked incongruously as if it should belong to a contented baby rather than an adult man; especially one in a position that Poe held in such high regard as "editor."

"I am indeed, young sir!" answered Montessor. "I'm so delighted you have come to see me, Mr. Poe."

"But... How did you know my name?" asked the young writer, astonished.

"Er... Oh, that's easy enough. You look quite like your brother, Henry. He told me that he thought you might call on me shortly."

Poe was not entirely convinced by this explanation, but in the event decided to take it at face value.

"Sit down, young sir," continued Montessor.

The writer looked around him in confusion. There did not appear to be a single surface upon which he could carry out the request, unless he started moving the stacks of papers; something that appeared to be a Herculean task.

Montessor, undaunted, simply grabbed a pile and threw them to the floor, uncovering what appeared to be a velvet-covered chair, which, judging by its condition, had suffered beneath the weight of many an aspiring writer. Then, he indicated the uncluttered space to his visitor with a wave of his hand.

Poe took him up on the invitation and sat, putting his portfolio on his knees.

"I've come to see you, sir," he began as he opened it, "to ask if you would be interested in some of my other work."

“Let’s see what you have there,” said the portly editor as he started to peruse the bits and pieces that Poe had assembled.

As he read, the young author felt suddenly uncomfortable, as if he was being watched. He looked up to see a large raven staring at him through the slightly dirty window, and gave a shiver of apprehension.

“Hmm... hmm... yes, indeed... quite interesting,” Montessor mumbled half to himself as he read. After several minutes, he looked up at the expectant visitor, and read:

“*In visions of the dark night
I have dream’d of joy departed—
But a waking dream of life and light
Hath left me broken-hearted.*”

“I like it, young sir. It’s a bit conventional, but I can see you have potential. Why, when I was your age, I was writing about clouds and daffodils.

“In any case, there’s not enough here to fill even a small volume; I need more.”

Poe could not believe his ears; this was the moment he felt he’d been awaiting his entire life.

“You mean you’re interested in it?”

“Isn’t that what I said? If you can give me more, I’d be happy to publish a collection of your work.”

“Yes, of course, I’d be happy to... Only...” he hesitated with embarrassment before continuing, “I’m a bit short of funds at the moment and I wonder if you would be able to pay me a small advance. I’m not sure, you see, that I’ll be able to pay for my rooms if I don’t earn some money soon.”

Montessor placed his hands on the desk before him, steepling his fingers and tapping them together as he thought.

“An advance, hmm? Yes, I see how you could imagine... but I don’t know... This is a new publication, our investors are, understandably, concerned about throwing good money after bad... No advertising to speak of, you see...” Suddenly, he brightened, as an idea seemed to spring into his head.

“How would you like to live rent free while you complete your work, young sir? I have a big house that is all but empty except for my ward, Ligeia, and me. To be honest, we just rattle around inside it most of the time. You could have your own room and we’d even provide your meals. Ligeia is quite a splendid cook and is often frustrated that the only one who tastes her efforts are the two of us.”

Poe sat in astonished silence at this generous and unexpected offer. Montessor seemed not to notice and continued:

“Yes, yes, the more I think about it, the more I like this idea. You will have the freedom from mundane worries you need to be able to create, and Ligeia will have someone else to fuss over besides myself. It’s settled then, you must come to us tonight.”

“Sir, are you sure about this? I barely know what to think, as it is far more than I could have ever hoped. I find myself almost speechless with gratitude.”

“Nonsense, young sir! This will suit us all perfectly. I know that you will enjoy Ligeia’s company as well, in those moments when you are not hard at work providing new material for our project.

“By the way; have you thought of a title?”

“I was thinking of the title of the work you cited, sir, *A Dream...*”

“No, no, that will never do! It’s, well, it does nothing to draw the attention of the reader. Let me look through these for a moment... Yes, this will do nicely: *Tamerlane*. It’s intriguing, gripping. Yes, yes, that shall be the title.

“Now, shall I send a cab around to help you bring your belongings to us?”

“Sadly, sir, I have few enough of those. I can easily bring them along on foot.”

Montessor quickly wrote down an address on a crumpled bit of paper, which he handed to Poe. "Then, hasten home and be at our door in plenty of time for supper. I shall go and tell Ligeia to prepare a room for you. Oh, she will be most delighted, I assure you!" So saying, the rotund editor struggled to his feet, which were surprisingly small for a man of his size, and made his way through the clutter to the door, ushering his young visitor before him. "We shall have a fine time, young sir. A fine time indeed."

As the door shut behind him, Poe felt as if he should pinch himself to be sure that he was awake. Montessor's offer had lifted the burden of impending homelessness from his shoulders. If he had been buoyant on the walk to the offices of *The North American*, he practically floated on the return to his lodgings. It took him mere moments to gather up his meager effects and once again set out onto the streets of Baltimore. On a tree outside, a raven shook out its feathers, bobbed its head several times, then flew off into the windswept sky.