

DAWN OF NOTHING  
BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

*The Great God ARP was a little understood diety. But it was a time of little understanding, save in one house where the old was studied.*

Illustrated by Cartier

Perhaps it was the wind that deflected the arrow ever so slightly. Perhaps it was that old Maluph, Master Fletcher to the People of Bart, had let his craftsman's hand shake a little in the fashioning of this one shaft. Perhaps it was that Eney, Bart's chief huntsman, had taken aim and let fly too hastily.

But Eney himself had another explanation. He was to blame—but his culpability was more than a mere matter of aim too quickly and carelessly taken, of bow insufficiently bent. He was to blame because, last night, he had deliberately neglected the worship of ARP. And ARP the Watchful, ARP the All-Seeing, had overlooked neither the slight nor the quarrel between Eney and Pardi, Hereditary Warden of the God, that had preceded it. He had watched, with divine disapproval, the deliberate abstention from the propitiatory rites of the Shielded Light, the Extinguished Fire. And so ARP, Guider of the Missile, had signified his extreme displeasure by withdrawing his benign influence from the feathered shafts in Eney's quiver.

The stag, a short length of arrow protruding from its flank, sprang high into the air. The hunter hastily snatched another arrow from his quiver, fitted notch to bowspring, drew back swiftly to his right ear. But he was too late. Scarcely had the animal's feet touched earth, before it had bolted into the forest. The sound of its passage through the undergrowth diminished, faded fast, as trees and shrubs and bushes were interposed between the hunter and his quarry.

Eney returned the arrow to his quiver, slung the long six-foot bow over his shoulder. His right hand went down to the knife in the sheath at his right side. His thigh muscles tensed as he fell into the runner's crouch, started to follow the stag. Then he remembered.

"Great ARP, your pardon," he muttered. And, standing alone in the sunlit field at the forest's verge, he went through the daylight ritual. Through ringed thumbs and forefingers he stared solemnly at the cloudless sky. Still looking up, he brought his hands down from his face, clapped them sharply five times. And, his face passive, he thought: *But why, oh ARP, must your wardens always be such fools! Take to yourself men and we will respect them and respect you all the more ...*

He was careful to keep his bearded lips motionless. ARP sees all, hears all, but the thoughts of men are a mystery to him. Thus it was that the Ancients fell.

Eney, having slipped with practised ease through the brief rites, took up the chase. The trail was easy to follow. The stag had been bleeding copiously. ARP or no ARP the arrow could not have been badly aimed. The hunter found himself regretting the time that he had wasted at the forest edge. As he ran he remembered his bitter argument with Pardi, the warden—the quarrel during which he had asserted that ARP was a fit God for women and children and fat, priestly men, but no deity for the warrior or the hunter. He would never have gone so far had he not been sure that the grizzled Bart secretly agreed with him: Bart, as Chief, would find it impolitic to challenge the theocratic power so intimately bound up with his own, lest, by so doing, he weaken his own authority. He had no objections should others do so. He had even been known to protect heretics from the wrath of the followers of ARP—his protection consisting of a plea, for tolerance, the invocation of the vague yet universally respected principle known as the Magnic Charter. And if the heretic had been, like Eney, a strong limn armed, his heresy had gone unpunished.

It was a pity that most of such heretics had been married men whose wives had bleated tearfully for a return to the flock of Pardi.

A briar tendril curled around the hunter's ankle, brought him crashing heavily down. Luckily for him the bushes broke his fall. He scrambled to his feet, bleeding from a score of scratches—his scanty

summer garment of light skins was not much protection—carefully disentangled the string of his bow from the sharp thorns. He was almost decided to leave it there—here, with the trees close together and but a narrow passage through the bushes left by the wounded stag, it was a serious encumbrance. But he did not want to lose it. There were things in the woods—some said it was the wild dogs, but why should *they* do anything so pointless?—that carried off for their own purposes any man-fashioned stick.

So he pushed Olt, hampered by the long how, alert for the frequent bright splashes on leaf and mossy ground. The trail was growing old. Already great fat-bodied flies were feasting on the spilled blood, rising with resentful buzz at his approach, falling back again to their meal after his passing. But he dare not hurry. Even should he keep his rebellious mind from straying from the business on hand, he dare not hurry. A broken leg, a seriously twisted ankle, could well mean his death. By day there were the packs of dogs—although they, as a rule, preferred more open country. And both by day and night there were the tree cats. If he failed to return from this expedition, then Pardi, surely, would attribute his disappearance to the wrath of ARP.

*Come off it!* he thought in the vernacular of his people. *Even if the warden is sweet on young Lisa there ain't no need ter think abaht it orl the time, ter let it put yer orf yer stroke. The nwin thing is ter get that ruddy stag afore them ruddy cats gets 'int first!*

Doggedly, he pushed on. The trail became fresher again. There were gouts of blood that had not been found by the carrion flies. There were bruised and broken stems with the sap still oozing from the fractured ends. And there was, faint but growing louder, the sound of a heavy body forcing its way through the forest.

And this sound suddenly ceased.

Eney drew his knife. He pushed on boldly, perhaps a little carelessly. He noticed that the undergrowth was thinning, that the trees were now sparsely spaced and somehow sickly. But he failed to draw the obvious conclusion.

The dwelling of the Ancients that had once stood there had long vanished. Perhaps the failure of ARP's protection had let it be swept away like a dead leaf before a gale. Perhaps the infinitely slow, infinitely ruthless strength of growing things had leveled its walls over the course of centuries. But although the building itself was gone, the artificial caverns beneath it remained. And into these, following his quarry, fell the hunter

It was dark when he recovered consciousness.

In his nostrils was the scent of death, of once hot blood gone cold and stale. Beneath him was some thing soft yet firm, the carcass of the stag. His exploratory hand touched the antlered head. He was briefly thankful that he had not fallen on to those branching, dangerous weapons.

Right above him was a patch of pale light. Silhouetted against it were the leafy branches of trees, among which glimmered a few dim stars. And there was something scrambling in the aperture, something that uttered a low mewling sound.

The hunter fumbled in his pouch. He pulled out his flint and steel. He smote the crude wheel with the palm of his hand. In the light of the sparks the green eyes of the big cat in the opening glowed balefully. Eney could see no more than a dim outline—but he sensed that it was tensed for a spring.

But it caught. It smoldered at first and then, after more than a little blowing on the part of the fire-maker, burst into flickering flame. The hunter thrust up his crude, feeble torch. He was just in time. The big cat snarled, showing its sharp white teeth. It slashed out and down with a razor-clawed fore paw. It hit the torch, sent scattering a shower of sparks, but did not extinguish the flame. It snarled again—and there was something of a scream in the ugly sound. There was a frantic scrabbling of the three uninjured paws as it backed away from the hole. And only a stink of burned fur remained.

"May ARP let you be smitten, you mucking, dirty swine!" shouted Eney. He jumped down from the carcass of the stag, landed, with a loud crackling, in a pile of dry debris. He tried to drag the stag away from under the opening, but it was too heavy. It was a pity. It meant that much good meat would be spoiled.

Working fast—for he heard the cats prowling and crying to each other overhead—he piled the

debris high on the body of the animal. He smote his wheel again with the palm of his hand. This time the tow caught fast and easily. He blew upon the glowing smolder until he had a flame. This he applied to the bonfire that he had built on top of the dead stag. It roared and crackled into flaming life. The smoke and flames rushed up through the opening. A draft of colder air came in from somewhere, replacing that lost by convection. There was no danger of suffocation—and the night-prowling cats would never dare a leap down through the blaze.

Enery grinned. He was safe for the night. The smell of roasting venison was savory in his nostrils—he hoped that it would be equally savory in the nostrils of his enemies. He drew his knife and hacked for himself a large steak, impaled it on a long, pointed stick. He sat down, the meat extended to the fire on the improvised fork, and waited for his supper to cook.

It was not until he was eating it, some minutes later, that the stench of burning meat drove him away from the fire, prodded him into an investigation of the place into which he had fallen.

It must have been used as a storeroom of some kind. There were boxes—or what was left of them—all packed with sheet after sheet of flimsy fabric. Unlike some of the material left—and found now and again by lucky discoverers—by the Ancients, it was useless for clothing or any kindred purpose. It was dry and brittle and tore easily. It had been disturbed by rats and other small beasts who had shredded it and carried it away to their nests. And in one or two of the boxes the rats themselves had nested. But it burned. Useless it was for anything but that. It burned well.

Enery was disappointed. He had known others who had made similar finds, who had stumbled upon storehouses of all kinds of useful tools and weapons. He stood there in the light of his flaring fire, tearing with his teeth at the hunk of meat held in his right hand, holding a sheet of the useless fabric in his left. He looked at it contemptuously. Its yellowed surface was marred with little black marks. It was neither useful nor ornamental. He screwed it into a tight ball and cast it on to the fire.

But there must, he told himself, be something of value stored here. He lifted one of the boxes, intending to tip it over and spill its contents on the floor. But the sides burst as he was starting to do so. And in the box were still more of the sheets of fabric—but these were themselves boxed in a binding of some stiffer material. He opened them, looked through them with intolerant ignorance. There was one that appealed to him. It had pictures in addition to the meaningless little black marks—pictures such as William, the artist, could never hope to equal. There were men there, strangely clad and bearded. And there were women, attired as strangely as the men or naked, and with a slender grace that had passed from the world with the passing of the Ancients. The little black marks may have been meaningless to the hunter, but the pictures stirred something deep and lost in his nature, were magic casements opening wide on fairy lands far beyond his limited ken.

Hastily, almost surreptitiously, he stuffed the little box into the pouch at his belt.

There were other little boxes with pictures in them. But these were ugly, meaningless. They were no more than lines and circles—and the clearest of them seemed to be depictions of fantastic and graceless constructions. But they might, Enery decided, have some value or interest. He would take them to Bart. Even though the stag was lost—or most of it—he would not return entirely empty handed.

He slept a little then, stretched out on a bed made of the pieces of flimsy fabric piled high in a rectangular pile. It was not too uncomfortable. And it was almost his last sleep. He was awakened by a spasm of violent coughing. His smarting, smoke-filled eyes opened on what, at first, seemed to be the Hell promised for 'all those who did not follow ARP. The cavern was filled with a ruddy glare, with scorching heat. The flames had spread from the fire to the dry debris with which the floor was littered.

Enery staggered to his feet. He forgot the little boxes of fabric that he had intended to take out with him, that lay beside his bed, soon to be consumed by the hungry flames. He remembered his bow that, as always, had been beside him as he slept. He snatched it up. And, more by instinct than by conscious volition, he turned his face to the indraught of cold air, started to stumble in the direction from which it was coming.

The heat of the fire was fierce on his back when he found the door. It was of thick timber, bound with metal. Long ago, when the Ancients had made it, it had been strong. Now it was rotten, yielded at the first, preliminary nudge of the hunter's shoulder. And Enery fell out on to the dew-wet grass, used his

last reserves of energy to crawl away from the tongues of fire that licked out after him.

And it was daylight, and the danger from the cats—although still to be reckoned with—was greatly lessened.

After a short rest the hunter began his trudge back to the village of Bart.

"And woes this I 'ear ?" demanded the chief. "My best 'unter back from the chase wiv nuffin'? I tell yer, Eney, it won't do!"

Eney looked back at his master. He looked at the little eyes, half hidden by the grizzled tangle of hair and beard. He thought that he detected a twinkle, belying the severity of the chief's tone.

"Sorry, guv'ner," he said. "I got a stag—a big 'un—but 'e fell into one o' them old caves wot the Old 'Uns used ter make. Aht in the woods, it was. I'd chased 'im for miles, too, follered 'is trail, like. 'E was bleedin' eavy, see? An' I was a bit careless like, an' fell in arter 'im an' laid myself aht. An' when I come round the 'ole wood was alive wiv bleedin' cats. So I 'ad ter light a fire, see? An' the ole stag ... well, 'e got burned up."

Pardi interrupted. He was standing beside the chief. At the sound of the high-pitched, womanish voice Eney looked at the warden with disfavor.

"Thus it is," cried Pardi, "wiv those 'o don't show ARP 'is proper respects. 'E don't guide their arrers, 'E don't. 'E don't put out the fire for 'em—not ! Not even when the fire is a-burning up food for the chief's own table. 'E don't never forget the unbelievers. 'E lets 'em come 'ome empty-'anded—\_ an' larfs."

"Empty-'anded, is it, yer little, sawed-off runt?" demanded the hunter. "Empty-'anded my left foot! Look, guv'ner! I found this for yer! I brought it back for yer!"

He fumbled in his pouch, fetched out the little box. Curious, Bart took -it, and his big, clumsy seeming hands handled it with reverent care.

"A book," he said. "One o' them books wot the Old 'Uns made." He opened it, leafed through it. "An' picshers !" he cried. "Reel Picshers! I must show young William this. 'E can't do nuffin like it !" The deep-set eyes behind the gray, matted hair gleamed lecherously.

"Lemme see! Lemme see!" clamored Pardi, standing on tiptoe to peer over the chief's shoulder.

"Garn ! Yer dirty old man!" growled Bart. "This ain't for the likes o' you. Yer knows as 'ow the wardens 'as got ter be pure in mind an' body!"

"That ain't nuffin ter do wiv it! This book should be put among the uvver treasures of ARP, for 'Is safe keeping."

"So the warden of ARP can feast 'is dirty old eyes on it yer mean. No, Pardi, you ain't gettin' it. An' I ain't keepin' it—more's the pity. This 'ere book is goin' on a long trip termorrer—it's 'igh time that I called on them two Mack brothers. They're fair batty over things like this, the pair of 'em. An' since my own smith can't turn out a decent pot or kettle to save 'is life—then your pore old chief 'as got ter go out of 'is own country to barter for 'em.

"You can go," he concluded. "No, not you, Eney. You stays 'ere an' 'as a sup o' beer along o' me. An' we'll look at these 'ere picshers, while we 'as the chance."

Two days' riding it was to the Village of Mack. Two days, that is, provided that all went well.

But the rarely used road was in a shocking condition, and all its inequalities had been baked hard by the late summer sun. This did not delay the dozen young men—led by Eney—of Bart's mounted bodyguard. They could have made the journey in half the time, but the speed of the party was, of necessity, slowed to the pace of the chief's gaudily painted caravan. He was an old man, he was fond of saying, and liked taking his comforts with him. It would have been better if his blacksmith, and not his youngest wife, had been on the list of comforts. For the rear axle of the cumbersome vehicle broke, and it took Eney and his companions all of six sweating hours to effect crude and temporary repairs.

The first night they camped by the roadside, several miles short of the Village of Les, in which settlement they should have spent the night. And nobody got much sleep. One of the rare nocturnal packs of hunting dogs was on the prowl and laid siege to the encampment. With a fire, and with twelve armed men, there was little danger. But there was no rest.

At the Village of Les there was a brief halt for gossip and refreshment, for the proper repair of the broken axle by Les' smith. And Les and Bart had to waste an hour or so in gloating over the pictures in the book.

Perhaps Bart would have stayed there the night, but the other chief obviously desired the trophy that Enery had brought back from the cavern of the Ancients. He was offering quite fantastically high prices in fowls and eggs—both of which commodities Bart had in abundance in his own country. And the name of Les and his people was a byword for thievery and all kinds of dishonesty. So Bart, at last, gave the order to push on.

Again they would have camped by the road. But the Romans were out—a war party of at least twenty bucks. Enery saw the dust raised by their ponies' hoofs whilst they were still miles distant. And when they came sweeping across the undulating plain, at right angles to the road, the hunter and his men were ready for them. Some—together, with Bart and his wife—had taken cover in a clump of trees. Others were hiding behind the caravan. As soon as the raiders came within range they were greeted with a shower of arrows. A lucky shot—*an' I didn't pray to Mr. Bleedin' ARP neither*, thought Enery—took their leader in the throat. He fell from his pony, and the animal came to an abrupt standstill, stoad nuzzling the body of its late master.

"Old yer fire!" shouted Bart to his men. "Don't rile them baskets any more. Let 'em take their chief away an' they won't be back till they've picked a new 'un !"

And it was so.

And Bart decided, wisely, to keep moving, as fast as possible. To arrive at the Village of the Mack Brothers in the early hours of the morning was better than not to arrive at all.

The village, save for the watch, seemed to be sleeping when the little procession creaked and plodded up the one narrow street. The thatched roofs on either side were humped dark and ominous against the stars. And there were those in the bodyguard who remembered, with a superstitious shudder, that neither Mack the Elder nor Mack the Younger followed ARP, that they had long held the reputation of being sorcerers. This, in itself, was nothing—but it was said that the Mack sorceries worked.

Halfway up the street, standing on a slight eminence, was a house larger than the others. And there was someone awake in this house—someone awake and working. Light streamed through the crevices of a shuttered window, and there was the sound of metal beating on metal.

Old Bart, perched high on the driving seat of his caravan, gave the order to halt. He threw down the -reins, and they were caught by one of the bodyguard who had already dismounted. He clambered down from his seat.

"They're up yet," he growled.

Slowly, ponderously, he stumped to the door of the house. He hammered upon it authoritatively. Somebody—a small, thin silhouette against the light from within—opened it.

"Bart," said the chief. "Bart, Leader of the People of Bart, to pay 'is respects to Old Mack an' Young Mack, Chieftains o' the People o' Mack."

The figure in the door turned, shouted back to the interior of the house : "It's Bart, father !"

"This is an odd time to come a visitin' !" replied a deep male voice. "All right, Beth. Ask 'im in !"

"But he's got about half a hundred men wi' him !"

"They can't come in. Leave 'em to find some place to sleep."

"Orl right," growled Bart. "Orl of yer find some place ter kip—an' don't let me find any of yer in my caravan! 'Op it !"

As the huntsman turned to go the chief called him back.

"No, Enery. You stay wiv me. 'Ave yer got the book ?"

"No, guv'ner. You 'ave."

"So I 'ave. An' you'd better leave yer bow an' arrers outside—these 'ere Mack chiefs are rather fussy."

It was light inside the House of Mack—so much so that theotwo visitors blinked, dazzled. Here were no crude, tallow candles such as lit the homes in their own village. There were, instead, lamps of brass,

the flame shaded with a shield of translucent horn.

Enerly looked at the girl who had let them in. Slight, she was, red haired and freckled, with sea green eyes. She was tall, too—far above the average. With her the dumpy womenfolk of the People of Bart compared most unfavorably. She was like—he searched his mind for a simile—she was like the women in the pictures in the book.

Gravely, she returned his stare. Then she turned abruptly. She led the two men along a short passage, opened 'a door leading into a large room. She motioned them in.

It was a strange room. It was half study—although the word had long since passed out of use—and half workshop. There were shelves along two of the walls, and on them were rows of the little boxes of fabric called books. And in one corner of the room there was a forge, and an anvil. At this Young Mack was working, beating away at a piece of metal.

Old Mack—his silvery hair clean, his lined face shaven—advanced, with outstretched hand, to greet them. His pale gray eyes were friendly and it seemed to Enerly that he treated Bart with an affectionate respect.

"Well," he said, "an' what can I do for ye?"

"I've a present for yer, Mack—and an 'ard enough time I 'ad bringing it! Mind you," continued Bart hastily, "even though it is a present I shouldn't say no to a few o' yer brother's good pots and pans in return."

"An' let's see ,your present first, Bart."

" 'Ere !"

Old Mack took the little box of fabric.

"Anither book !" he breathed.

"Book?" barked Young Mack. Black haired, swarthy', sweating from his fire, he came to look. He looked over his brother's shoulder. Then he spat disgustedly. "More o' yon muck !" was all that he said. He went back to his workbench, busied with what looked like a sort of water wheel with metal blades.

"Wot does it say ?" demanded Bart. "Wot does it say?"

"'Tis a song. 'Tis one o' the songs of Ancients. Ay, 'tis strange stuff—but not wi'out its ane beauty.

But even I canna fathom what yon man who wrote it was driving at."

At his bench Young Mack was pouring water from a jug into a polished copper cylinder. He screwed home the cap of this cylinder. The girl Beth was beginning to take down the shutters from the windows. Enerly was helping her.

"Ay, an' the pictures," went on Old Mack. "'Tis a bonny wee book, friend Bart, an' Ah'll see what ma brither 'as tae gi'e ye."

"An ye're barterin' ma guid pots an' pans for yon trash ?" demanded the man at the workbench.

"It *is* getting light, Uncle," said Beth from the window.

"Never mind that. Fetch me fire, girl, tae put under ma wee boiler !"

"But wot does it say, Old Mack ?" demanded Bart. "Wot does it say ? I f it is a song, carn't yer sing it ?"

There was a pause, a silence, broken only by the faint, hiss of escaping steam. The pale light of early morning streamed through the windows.

" 'Tis not that kind o' song, Bart."

The old man began to mumble. All that his hearers got was a sense of rhythm. He was reading for himself alone. Then, freakishly, his voice came loud and clear.

*"The Stars are fading, and the Caravan*

*Starts for the Dawn of Nothing . . ."*

"Hurry ! shouted Young Mack. "More fire! Quick!"

A jet of steam impinging on its blades, the little wheel was revolving rapidly.

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