

Polaris and the Goddess Glorian

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Introduction

In the antarctic wilds far below Ross Sea, Polaris Janess (Polaris—of the Snows), was born, of a mother he never knew, and grew to manhood's years knowing one human face only, that of his father. When that father died, the young man set his face to the north, to find the world of men, of which his father and his books had told him; and to deliver to the National Geographic Society in Washington a packet containing scientific data compiled by his explorer sire.

Journeying through the silent wastes with his dog team, the son of the snows found Rose Emer, an American heiress, who had strayed from an exploring party, and who waited death in the icy wilderness.

Hurled southward again in a breakup of the ice floes where they had camped, Polaris and the girl came upon the kingdom of Sardanes—a valley girded by volcanic hills which warmed it, and peopled by a lost fragment, some two thousand strong, of the ancient Greeks.

The adventures of the man of the snows and the American maid in Sardanes; how they escaped thence; how their love bloomed amid the eternal snows; and how they won at last to America, where the Geographic Society hailed the dead Stephen Janess as the first man to set foot on the Southern Pole—all these things have been related.

Zenas Wright, friend of Polaris's father, and a celebrated student of volcanic phenomena, told Polaris that the fires which had warmed Sardanes for centuries were passing away from the valley, and that all life in the ancient kingdom must perish.

Chartering the United States second-class cruiser *Minnetonka*, Polaris, Wright, and Captain James Scoland set sail to rescue the Sardanians. Scoland, who loved Rose Emer, deserted Janess and Wright in the wilderness and went back to America to woo the Rose-maid. But Rose Emer refused him, and gray Marcus, Polaris's dog, protected her from Scoland's profaning lips and tore the recreant captain so horribly that the man went mad, and in his madness revealed his inhuman treachery.

Again the *Minnetonka* turned her nose to the mysterious South, and Rose Emer went down the bitter seas to find her sweetheart.

Meanwhile Polaris and old Zenas Wright found Sardanes a waste of snows, its volcanic girdle cold and dead, its people, led by the mad priest of Analos, gone to their doom through the fiery "Gateway" of their god Hephaistos. Only Minos, the kind, and his bride, the Lady Memene, remained alive, hidden in a cave in the hills. Those four, Polaris, Wright, and the two Sardanians, were picked up by the *Minnetonka* near the Antarctic Circle as they were making their perilous way northward in a small launch which they had found in the wreck of Captain Scoland's supply ship.

In the story which follows will be related the tale which was brought back to America by old Zenas Wright—what befell

Polaris and his companions after the *Minnetonka* turned northward—homeward.

CHAPTER I

THE GOLDEN STRANGER

On the bridge of the cruiser *Minnetonka* stood Minos, the Sardanian king, staring southward in the wake of the ship, southward where his lost, dead kingdom lay buried under the soft, cruel snows beyond the unchartered antarctic seas. Ahead of the ship, full of promise, full of hope, was America. For the *Minnetonka* had rounded the Horn that morning and was on her long straight course for the port of home.

Below him, in her cabin, was the girl bride of Minos, the Lady Memene, so strangely won and saved from the crowning horror of his kingdom's fall. It was mid-forenoon of a cloudless day. Gay voices echoed along the decks of the cruiser. Gladness was in the very air the voyagers breathed—the gladness of the homeward-bound.

But the mien of the king was somber. There was a shadow on his brow and deeper shadows in his dark eyes gazing so steadily into the south. Bright as were his prospects, memory still whispered sadly to him of the only spot on earth which had been home to him. He could not forget.

Far away on the dancing, sparkling waters something caught the eye of the king, a something which flashed and disappeared and flashed again, as the wave on which it rode dipped and arose among its fellows. Minos watched it curiously.

Leaning against the rail beside the king, so close that their elbows almost touched, was Lieutenant Irwin Everson, commander of the *Minnetonka*, trim in his naval blue. Minos touched his shoulder and said:

"Yonder—something shines on the water."

Everson followed with his eyes the course indicated by the pointing finger of the king. Again the distant object flashed in the sunlight, far away on the starboard quarter. "Might be ice; but I've seen enough of that lately to know that it isn't," muttered Everson as he, too, caught the flash, "and no wave ever shone like that."

Stepping into the pilothouse, the lieutenant returned with his glasses. Their lenses revealed to his eyes a glittering patch from which the rays of the sun were reflected as it rose and fell with the waves. But even the powerful binoculars were inadequate to distinguish the form and substance of the thing.

"I can't make it out," Everson said as he lowered the glasses. "But here comes the keenest pair of eyes on the ship." He leaned from the bridge and called down to a tall man who was crossing the deck below.

"Oh, Mr. Janess! Can you spare us a moment? We need your eyesight."

Polaris turned a smiling face in response to the call. He, too, was glad of the home-going; no man on the ship more so. In a moment he joined the king and the lieutenant on the bridge.

Though he was not so tall by the breadth of a hand as the Sardanian, who was indeed a giant, the tawny head of the son of the snows was inches above that of the young naval man. As they stood one on either side of him, Everson involuntarily stepped back a pace. He felt puny and absurd, and he was by no means a small man.

For the half of a minute, Janess gazed through the glasses, altering their focus slightly. He lowered them suddenly and swung on his heel to face Everson.

"Put the ship—" He stopped and his face flushed. "I beg pardon," he continued. "It is not mine to give orders, but yonder a man floats. He lies face downward across a piece of wreckage."

Lieutenant Everson hurried into the pilot house, and down to old MacKechnie among his boilers was flashed the signal which swung the gray cruiser off her course in a long arc to the southward.

"A man, you say?" the commander queried as he rejoined Polaris and the king. "But what is it that glitters so?"

Polaris, with the glasses at his eyes again, did not at once reply. When he did, the answer was surprising.

"It is the man that glitters. If he be not of metal himself, then is he clothed in it from head to toe, and it glimmers—" He turned to Minos and lapsed into the Greek of Sardanes. "It glimmers, Minos, as did that suit of armor which thou didst leave behind thee in the cave on the Mount of Latmos," he said.

The king stirred to quick interest. The eyes of the naval lieutenant widened with amazement as Polaris repeated his remark in English.

"A man clothed in metal! In armor!" he exclaimed. "And floating here in the South Atlantic! What can that mean? Poor chap; whoever he is, he will never tell us. He must have been dead for days. But it's well worth the investigation."

Impatiently the three men stood at the rail of the bridge as the ship swung on.

At an eighteen-knot clip, the *Minnetonka* cut swiftly through the waves, nearer and nearer to the flashing burden of the waves. Soon other eyes not so keen as those of Polaris could descry the strange objective of the ship. Forward along the rail, sailors clustered, shouting their surprise, and staring at the unusual spectacle of the glittering man afloat.

Presently, with a deep thrumming of her valves, the *Minnetonka* slowed down. With a word to Everson, Polaris left the bridge and hastened across the deck. As a boat was swung over the side in the davits, he sprang into it with the sailors. Less than two-score strokes of the oars took the boat alongside the floating mystery.

Then, indeed, had the sailors cause to stare with open mouths.

On a crisscross tangle of slender beams, oddly twisted and broken, lay the body of a man. So small was the raft of wreckage which supported him that his head and feet projected at each side, and as the waves tossed his unstable craft, first his face and then his heels were dipped beneath the

water. Very wide of shoulder was the stranger and powerfully framed, if the outlines of the garb he wore did not belie him.

From crown to sole he was dressed in jointed armor, cunningly fashioned and decorated, and the whole of which gleamed in the sunlight as only burnished copper or red gold can gleam. His hands only were bare; smooth, strong hands, clenched fast about two of the broken beams beneath him.

But it was none of those things, and they were strange enough, that caused the coxswain to cry out hoarsely as the boat wore alongside, or that caused Polaris Janess, bent over with outstretched hands, to draw them back from the floating stranger, while his lips parted and his breath came hard.

"He's alive! By the grace of God, he's alive!" cried the coxswain.

Face downward the stranger lay, as Polaris had said, loose-flung and inert, and sprawled as though some force had pitched him there. But though his head was more often under the water than above it, his broad shoulders heaved and fell regularly. He was alive.

The supreme wonder of it, and that which awed Polaris and the sailors, was that *the man breathed when his head was under water!*

When a wave tilted the raft so that his face was raised, his breath was expelled with a wheezing, whistling sound. When he was submerged, a stream of small bubbles arose about his neck and clung to the surface of his metal helmet.

For a long moment Polaris stood and looked down at this amazing thing. Then he reached out and very gently took the stranger by the shoulders to turn his face to the sky. So tight was the clutch of those strong bare hands about the two beams of the raft which they held that the entire structure tipped when the son of the snows laid hold. In vain he tried to loosen that grasp. It was not to be done without breaking the man's fingers. To make an end of it, Janess took an axe from the hands of the coxswain and cut through the beams.

Still gripping the wooden fragments, the man turned over on his back.

Then the mystery of the stranger's breathing was partially made clear. Under the flare of the helmet he wore his brow was hidden. His eyes were fast closed. Fitting tightly over the bridge of his nose and extending down so that it covered his mouth and part of his chin, was a projecting masklike contrivance of metal and leather. Its straps covered the man's ears and were made fast somewhere at the back of his head under the helmet. So tightly was the mask affixed that its straps cut into the flesh of the man's cheeks. It much resembled the masks worn by the soldiers in modern warfare to protect themselves from the gas attacks of their enemy.

Through its mechanism the breath of its wearer hissed and whistled like escaping steam.

Alive though the man was, and under circumstances which made his discoverers marvel, he was near death. Above and below the confines of the mask he wore, the bones of his face seemed almost thrusting through the flesh. The flesh itself was

wasted and puckered by the action of the sea water, and the skin was cracked and raw. His hands, which clung so tenaciously to the bits of broken wood, were bleeding about the nails, and his wrists were gashed and water-eaten.

"Now, here is work for Dr. Marsey," Polaris said. He gathered the limp form of the stranger into his arms and lifted him into the boat.

At the rail of the *Minnetonka* as the boat was shipped, a curious crowd met the advent of the man from the sea. Carrying him as lightly as though he had been a child, Polaris laid the man on the deck. The ship's doctor pushed through the wondering sailors and bent over him.

"Not dead?" he exclaimed when he saw the stranger's face. "A most amazing thing!"

"What resurrection from antiquity have we here?" said old Zenas Wright, falling on his knees beside Polaris, who was supporting the man's head. "No museum I ever saw boasted a suit of armor like this one." The scientist ran a finger over the delicate tracery on the glittering corselet of the stranger.

Polaris sought and found the catch which released the chin strap and laid the open helmet on the deck. Another chorus of exclamations greeted the appearance of the stranger's head. It was covered with a mass of wavy red hair, so red that it shone like flames in the sunlight.

Rumors of the wonder on deck had drawn the grizzled MacKechnie up from his beloved engines.

"Mark me, yon laddie's a Scot—if he isna' of the wild Irish," was his dry comment when he saw the fiery head on the deck.

Undoing its buckle, Janess next laid aside the odd mask from the face of the stranger. Except that he had a high, bold nose and a mouth that closed in a thin, firm line, little could be made of the features of the man, they were so damaged by his long immersion in the sea and impressed by the tightly drawn trappings of the mask. But he apparently was a young man, of not more than thirty years.

In vain Dr. Marsey endeavored to force the man's clenched teeth apart so that he might apply the neck of the brandy flask which a steward had fetched. The jaw of the stranger was set like a rock and resisted all effort, and the doctor was compelled to pour the liquor between the locked teeth.

"If that doesna' fetch him, nothing whatever will," said MacKechnie, the nostrils of his ruddy old nose twitching.

"Ah, he's getting it!" said Zenas Wright. With the first trickle of the brandy down his throat, the unconscious man stirred faintly. His mouth opened and closed again with a snap, and his hands unclenched and let fall the bits of beams they had held so long. He coughed weakly. A faint tinge of color flowed into his face. His eyelids twitched, but did not open.

Dr. Marsey touched the man's temples and then his wrists with practised fingers.

"I think that we shall hear his story yet," he said. "What he needs now is a bed and nourishment. Bring him below."

Polaris looked into the battered face and was strangely stirred. The grim plight of the man he had rescued, the mystery of him, the strength of the spirit that seemed to dominate even that unconscious body; all struck an answering chord in the nature of the son of the snows. For he, too, had suffered and endured, almost to the gates of death, and had remained steadfast. Was it a premonition that made him feel so strongly that this man, should he live, would be his friend above many?

When the sailors would have taken up the stranger, Polaris waved them aside, and himself carried the inert body below, the blazing head resting on his shoulder.

MacKechnie gazed after him thoughtfully as he strode across the deck.

"Beware, laddie lad, beware!" the Scotchman muttered softly. "'Tis only ill luck he'll be bringin' to ye, yon gowden mon. For ye hae saved him from the sea."

Shivering throughout the length of her steel hull, the *Minnetonka* drove southward. A shrieking wilderness of wind and wave surrounded the ship. Reft from all guidance, she sheared through the furious waters with no more of volition than some monster projectile launched by the battling elements. Twice had the stout cruiser come free of scathe from the white portals of the Antarctic. Now she seemed winged by death to enter them once more and forever. In the grip of the tempest the ship was no more than a toy—a helpless, beaten thing.

Calamity, like a black dog, had crept hard upon the heels of the bizarre stranger. He had not been on the cruiser for six hours when a storm burst, the like of which for violence no man on board the ship ever had seen.

In an attempt to breast the gale and make for some port of safety, one of the propeller shafts—weakened perhaps by the pounding of the ice-drift months before—had snapped short off. Unequal to the double task, its twin had sprung beyond all use. Thereafter the scant mercy of chance ruled the destinies of the ship and of all she bore.

Nor was the damage to the shafting all that disaster had wrought. In her great peril the ship was stricken dumb and could not summon aid. Her wireless was out of commission. She could send no call across the face of the waters to sister ships, bidding them to hasten to her succor.

MacKechnie's dismal prophecy was likely to be visited, not on Polaris Janess alone, but upon the entire ship's company.

In the pilothouse, with the gale screeching outside his windows, Lieutenant Everson bent above his charts; but he was helpless and well-nigh hopeless. Down in the engine room, its busy clamor stilled, MacKechnie sat and stared bitterly at the mechanism which he so loved. It was useless now, its splendid powers crippled, its fires dying away to embers. If the inward prayers of the engineer were fervent, the flow of Scotch profanity which passed his lips at whiles was far more eloquent. He, too, was helpless. He cursed the day when he had decided with Everson to round the Horn and take the eastern route. They had learned at Dunedin, in New Zealand, that the

Panama Canal was closed by another Culebra slide, and they had thought that this was the quicker way to the port of home.

Better the delay than this!

On all the ship two hearts only were unshaken by the catastrophe. One was that of the stranger.

Freed of his armor, his body cleared and his scarred face and arms in bandages, he lay tossing in a bunk in one of the cabins. Dr. Marsey was unremitting in his care of the patient whom the sea had given him. Hot gruel and small doses of brandy, administered alternately, had turned the ebbing tide of the man's vitality. He was gathering strength. But his consciousness still strayed beyond the powers of any tempest to disturb it.

Another who thought nothing of the gale and its accompanying terrors was Zenas Wright.

Coupled with his keen and scientific mind, there was in the old geologist the enthusiasm of a boy, and an overmastering curiosity to learn new things. Many and wild had been the guesses which had followed the finding of the red-haired stranger. That he had been shipwrecked was plain enough to all. But who and what was he?

Some star out of *opéra-bouffe*, said one, out of a job and reduced to the necessity of wearing one of his own costumes. A lunatic, another said, and found more to agree with him. But whence the armor and the mask?

Let guessers guess and tempests roar, said Zenas Wright to himself. He was on the trail of knowledge. So he slipped into the cabin where the stranger lay. He stood at the head of the bunk and looked down where the red hair of the derelict flared on the pillow. The impressions left by the straps of his mask had filled out, and the lineaments of the man were more distinguishable than they had been. It was an agreeable face, thought Zenas Wright; all of it that the bandages did not hide. There were distinct lines of humor at the corners of the straight mouth and tiny wrinkles at the base of the craggy nose—lines which said that the wearer of them was a hearty fellow, who oftentimes had laughed long and merrily at jokes, whether of his own or another's making.

"But," thought Zenas to himself, "Marsey's been giving the fellow altogether too much brandy, or else he is in a rare fever." The geologist laid the back of his hand to the man's cheek. He found it cool. But it was ruddy to the ears, with the ruddiness that is associated with an intimate camaraderie with the wine cups.

At the touch of the old man's fingers, the stranger ceased his tossing. His eyes opened. One flash from them Zenas Wright caught, and he saw that they were sea-blue, bright and leaping eyes. Then their lids closed. The man shook his head wearily, and from his lips trembled what might have been a moan or a muttered word. The scientist bent hastily to listen, but the man made no further sound. As the old man watched him, his form relaxed and he lay apparently in a dreamless, voiceless slumber.

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