

*A Curious
Odyssey*

Also by Roy E Edwards

Celtic Sunset

A Trace of Blue

Brotherhood of the Book

The Egyptian

Dark Wind in Eden

In Shadows Fall

The Gunfighter

The Outlaw

Distant Voices

B. W. Harding's Barroom Tales

The Verres Letter

A

Curious

Odyssey

Roy E Edwards

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*Oannes said, "Evil never dies, it just slumbers for
a while and returns in a different guise."*



Introduction

The land of Shinar

Mesopotamia

Circa – 6,500BC

A long, slow wind flowed down from the hills, billowing out across the heat shriven plain, drifting like smoke in eternity: The wind did not care about the rise and fall of nations; it did not care about ghosts in the sky. Oannes said the world is its self, Oannes said old evil never dies; it just slumbers for a while and returns in a different guise. Beginnings he said of good and evil are lost in the mists of time.



The smoky, red ball of the sun slid westward, sinking like a stone in the burning sky. Crimson smeared the horizon and then it was gone. The fading afterglow shading the blue sky black, stars clustered in the deep, streaming a glimmering blue light, faint as an echo.



The wind moaned flowing round and through monumental ruins strewn across the plain. Here

and there the shattered remains of blue and gold tiles gleamed in the pale light of the rising moon like eyes alien and aloof. Once upon a long time ago the city was home to more than 25,000 people. An old city, a broken city, a dead city its history along with its walls cast down and forgotten. And yet perhaps nothing is truly lost forever. Stories are told and passed on and if only in stories, sometimes old, dead things live again.



No one knew his name: The living claimed their grandfathers spoke of him; they said he was long lived, but of course no one believed that because no one had ever met or even seen him, until now, this very night. Maybe our grandfathers spoke true, they whispered; slowly they gathered in ones and twos drifting in; huddling in groups. Once settled, no one stirred or made a sound.

Starlight in darkness: The remains of monumental ruins, foundation stones trapped in clay and drifting sand like broken teeth. Fragments of ruby red tiles intermingled with pieces of blue and gold strewn like chaff. The night air scented with the elusive fragrance of lemons, rosemary and lavender.



The old man looked formidable. Tall and lean with blue, gemlike eyes in a scarred face the colour of old copper. He sat in the lee of a crumbling, mud brick wall the base slumping in the desert floor. He leaned forward slightly, the glowing embers of a small campfire mirrored in his eyes. The villagers held their collective breath. His voice rolled out in a rich baritone, rumbling in their ears like muted thunder, his voice seeming to project as though he stood close, speaking directly to each and every individual. Later the villagers would comment on this small magic that really wasn't any kind of magic at all. What with voice projection being no more than a simple skill employed by minstrels, actors and storytellers the world over. Even so the aging, desert walker was more than just a wandering storyteller. It was in the planes, lines and valleys of his face, in his hard gemlike eyes and his scarred, capable hands.

His words painted mental pictures his voice filled the senses with sound. A warm, slow wind murmured as it drifted through the ruins. Stars swarmed in the deep, black sky. Somewhere a jackal howled the eerie sound faint with distance. The villagers stirred uneasily. Night shadows gathered in inky pools, staining the broken walls in jet and midnight's flickering shadows. A dog

howled mournfully in the nearby village. The jackal fell silent. Grains of sand stirred by the wind slithered and rustled like old, dry leaves: The night pressed in; the wind paused; the world stood still in a gathered moment. He said ----



A thousand years before Hammurabi ruled Babylon and wrote the laws that endure to this day Akkad stood here in Shinar like a glowing lamp in the darkness cast by an old and terrible evil.

The old man leaned forward, his face ruddy in the glowing embers of the campfire, his voice fraught with menace. The villagers hunched together in fear. The big man paused; caught himself and relaxed, settling down in his seat with a long drawn out sigh, his voice thick velvet. Fear fled. The almost palpable tension in the crowd draining away as the villagers shuffled and huffed, settling down to listen to his every word.

Later the story would be told and retold and they would hope and pray that one day he would pass this way again and they would never know that the story was a small piece of light in the shadow of a never ending story.

Akkad

(In the ancient Land of Shinar)

Sometimes when he lay on his bed in the thick, warm darkness he dreamed a pale, blue light bloomed behind his eyes. He experienced a mild, swooping sensation akin to drifting down, his great wings beating the blue hazed air. It's only a dream he told himself when he awoke with the rising sun. It was nonetheless a dream he cherished and spoke of to no one. As he grew and matured he thought himself to be in service to a trace of blue. It is the colour of God he told himself and for Akkad it was true. No words were spoken, no voice called out in his head, he simply felt, that as far as he was concerned, it was the right thing to do. A trace of blue, he thought, the nemesis of evil.



He stood in the centre of a vast courtyard situated behind the blue tiled walls of the temple proper. White river sand spread on a base of hard packed clay, the sand blindingly white in the glare of the sun.

The courtyard was a training ground and what few elected to train held no expectation of growing old, of surviving three score years and ten.

One day evil would return, one day the Adversary would make its presence known. One day the blood of its victims would bleed white. The temple warriors trained to battle the evil. Few survived the confrontation but Akkad did: His name in the forbidden language, the language of the Angels means Mercy Gift.



How do you tempt evil? How do you call it forth? The Lord Oannes said pride will do it every time and he was right. Oannes said old evil never dies it just slumbers and returns in a different guise.



The storyteller said the Adversary always won, no matter that the temple warriors trained for years. When they faced the Adversary, not one of them harboured any expectation of surviving the encounter. The Adversary stole the life force, draining it away leaving the blood white, the corpse as pale as moonlight. No one knew how it could do that or move in a shadow faster than the blink of an eye. Nor should you think Akkad was

victorious. No he was not. The Adversary was long lived yet rarely bred with its own kind. They were few. To kill one, in proportion to their number, was for the Adversary catastrophic. This was known to the temple priests but alas on down through the dusty centuries never a lethal blow. Yes, they inflicted wounds but lethal, the old man shook his head. It never happened: Until Akkad came along. No one had ever cast an Adversary into the sacred fire.

Hail Akkad he voiced softly, the Mercy Gift.



He said Nimrod, a temple priest, found Akkad when he was living a starveling child in a filthy, piss stinking alley running errands for market traders in exchange for a coin and a crust of stale bread. He lived wild, body and soul held together by a thread.

Later, when asked about his family he simply shrugged and said he had a vague memory of being led by the hand. He said he could hear the rustling sound of wings, feel the wind on his back as they beat the air, and then he stood alone in a dusty street close by the market square.

His story was not believed, he never spoke of it again.

Years passed by then suddenly one day he said to Nimrod, 'I do not want to join the priesthood. I will train for combat.' He said it with an air of finality.

It is said Akkad trained himself. No one knows how he knew how to do that.

It is said that one day he instructed the temple metal smith to cast a curious blade.



He stood in the centre of the great courtyard; the sun beat down, thickening the air with heat until it piled up in oppressive layers for all Shinar's borders were defined by two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris: The land between, crisscrossed with irrigation channels, baked beneath a shimmering white-gold disc. The town and its people torpid in the heat: Nonetheless the land of Shinar was a rich and vital link in a trading route that serviced towns and cities a thousand miles distant. The deep blue Shinar sky serene in its indifference to good and evil, to death or life lived three score years and ten. Kings rise and kings fall, priests drone and mutter and all that is or will be dreams beneath the uncaring blue sky. Oannes said old evil never dies it just slumbers and lives again. Oannes said the Adversary is one,

the Adversary is many. Oannes said much and wrote even more but he is dust now a memory in the wind. A name in a story few remember.

Though they stretch for ten thousand years, seasons come and seasons go. Nothing, the lean desert walker said solemn voiced; lasts for ever.



Akkad stood alone, his eyes adjusting to the glare, the white sand reflecting light and heat in shimmering waves.

Nimrod said he had the *gift*.



The Adversary, a thin, dark shadow, a fold in space and time it creates to hide in. No one knows how it can do that but back then; no one knew much of anything concerning the Adversary. In Shinar it killed relentlessly; only the scalplocks, the temple warriors defied it and the scalplocks died with sad, mind numbing regularity.

There only hope was to try and whip a blade into the shadow before the Adversary appeared. When it steps out of the shadow it moves with stunning speed. About one in a hundred scalplocks survived their first encounter, not one survived a second.

Shinar bled. Scalplocks stood on the white sand and died and the world moved on but not in Shinar. In Shinar the world stood still.

Was the Adversary one, was it many, what exactly did Oannes mean when he said evil returns in a different guise?



Until Akkad solved the mystery no one knew what exactly the Adversary stole from its victims. The body bore no wound. At least none the temple physicians could perceive, other than a faint discoloration, a blemish on the underside of the victim's throat below the jaw line. The physicians said the victims suffered no blood loss only, somehow the victims blood turned white, as though the blue life in the internal luminous river had drained away.



The sun burning high: Akkad stood on the white sand, his only garment a knee length, deep blue linen kilt. His skin gleamed like polished wood in the flooding light. His head was shaved but for a long braid of hair hanging down his back. He stood barefoot, his toes gripping the hot sand. Grey-blue

eyes over flaring cheekbones. Thick shoulders muscled chest tapering down to an athletic waist.

The old man paused for a heartbeat and then he said, 'Akkad could throw a blade with deadly precision faster than the eye could follow, faster than a bolt from a war bow.'



He stood perfectly balanced on the balls of his feet, left foot slightly forward, and his upper body at a barely discernible angle to his left hip. His right arm hung loose and easy down his right leg. The fingers of his left hand curled inward forming a loose fist. His mind was empty. He could simply react faster than thought. Thought would slow him down by as much as half a second. The difference he knew full well between life and death.

In this moment he stood in harmony with the sand beneath his feet, the walls of the huge courtyard, the temple and the sky, the very air he breathed. He stood in a moment that had no beginning and no end in the physical universe; he stood outside time – the mercy gift.

Nimrod said somehow the Adversary bends space and time. Akkad did not bend anything he was a seam in the thread of the universe in service to something that illumed the wings of the ones who

led him by the hand and left him in an alley. He was not the perfect warrior, there is no such thing, but in Shinar he came close.



He held a thin bronze blade in his right hand; the bare metal hilt snug against the heel of his palm in the cuplike depression formed by his curled fingers his thumb resting lightly on the metal held the blade steady. It was about flicking a sliver of razor sharp metal, slicing through flesh like a flensing knife, high up between the bones that protect the heart.

The thin bronze sliver was eight inches long an eighth of an inch wide one thirty-second of an inch thick tapering down to a wicked needle point. It was designed to throw or hammer home with the heel of the palm, a tool of the assassin, a killing blade and Akkad could throw it over a distance of thirty feet faster than an arrow shot from a bow. It isn't possible you say to yourself, no man alive can do that. A grim smile curved the storyteller's mouth, and you would be right but Akkad could. There is always one, he went on to say, who can accomplish the impossible.

