

FANTASY MASTERWORKS

LYONESSE II

The Green Pearl and Madouc

JACK VANCE



# **Lyonesse II**

**Jack Vance**

**Fantasy Masterworks Volume 35**

***Book II: The Green Pearl***

***Book III: Madouc***

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# **Book II - The Green Pearl**

## **Chapter 1**

### **I**

VISBHUME, apprentice to the recently dead Hippolito, applied to the sorcerer Tamurello for a similar post, but was denied. Visbhume then offered for sale a box containing articles which he had carried away from Hippolito's house. Tamurello, glancing into the box, saw

enough to warrant his interest and paid over Visbhume's price.

Among the objects in the box were fragments of an old manuscript. When news of the transaction came by chance to the ears of the witch Desmei, she wondered if the fragments might not fill out the gaps in a manuscript which she had long been trying to restore. Without delay she took herself to Tamurello's manse Paroli in the Forest of Tantrevalles, and there applied for permission to inspect the fragments.

With all courtesy Tamurello displayed the fragments. "Are these the missing pieces?"

Desmei looked through the fragments.  
“They are indeed!”

“In that case they are now yours,” said Tamurello. “Accept them with my compliments.”

“I will do so most gratefully!” said Desmei. As she packed the fragments into a portfolio, she studied Tamurello from the corner of her eye. She said: “It is somewhat odd that we have not met before.”

Tamurello smilingly agreed. “The world is long and wide. New experiences await us always, for the most part to our pleasure.” He inclined his head with

unmistakable gallantry toward his guest.

“Nicely spoken, Tamurello!” said Desmei. “Truly, you are most gracious!”

“Only when circumstances warrant. Will you take refreshment? Here is a soft wine pressed from the Alhadra grape.”

For a time the two sat discussing themselves and their concepts. Desmei, finding Tamurello both stimulating and large with vitality, decided to take him for her lover.

Tamurello, who was keen for novelty, made no difficulties and matched her energy with his own, and for a season all

was well. However, in due course Tamurello came to feel that Desmei, to an enervating degree, lacked both lightness and grace. He began to blow hot and cold, to Desmei's deep concern. At first she chose to interpret his waning ardor as a lover's teasing: the naughtiness, so to speak, of a pampered darling. She thrust herself upon his attention, tempting him with first one coy trick, then another.

Tamurello became ever more unresponsive. Desmei sat long hours with him, analyzing their relationship in all its phases, while Tamurello drank wine and looked moodily off through the trees.



Neither sighs nor sentiment, Desmei discovered, affected Tamurello. She learned that he was equally proof against cajolery, while reproaches seemed only to bore him. At last, in a facetious manner, Desmei spoke of a former lover who had caused her pain and hinted of the misfortunes which thereafter had dogged his life. Finally she saw that she had captured Tamurello's attention, and veered to more cheerful topics.

Tamurello let prudence guide his conduct, and once again Desmei had no complaints.

After a hectic month Tamurello found that he could no longer maintain his

glassy-eyed zest. Once again he began to avoid Desmei, but now that she understood the forces which guided his conduct, she brought him smartly to heel.

Desperate at last, Tamurello invoked a spell of ennui upon Desmei: an influence so quiet, gradual and unobtrusive that she never noticed its coming. She grew weary of the world, its sordid vanities, futile ambitions and pointless pleasures, but so strong was her disposition that she never thought to suspect a change in herself. From Tamurello's point of view, the spell was a success.

For a period Desmei moved in gloomy contemplation through the windy halls of

her palace on the beach near Ys, then at last decided to abandon the world to its own melancholy devices. She made herself ready for death, and from her terrace watched the sun set for the last time.

At midnight she sent a bubble of significance over the mountains to Faroli, but when dawn arrived, no message had returned.

Desmei pondered a long hour, and at last thought to wonder at the dejection which had brought her to such straits.

Her decision was irrevocable. In her final hour, however, she bestirred

herself to work a set of wonderful formulations, the like of which had never been known before.

The motives for these final acts were then and thereafter beyond calculation, for her thinking had become vague and eerie. She surely felt betrayal and rancor, and no doubt a measure of spite, and seemed also urged by forces of sheer creativity. In any event she produced a pair of superlative objects, which perhaps she hoped might be accepted as the projection of her own ideal self, and that the beauty of these objects and their symbolism might be impinged upon Tamurello.

In the light of further circumstances<sup>1</sup> her success in this regard was flawed, and the triumph, if the word could so be used, went rather to Tamurello.

In achieving her aims, Desmei used a variety of stuff: salt from the sea, soil from the summit of Mount Khambaste in Ethiopia, exudations and pastes, as well as elements of her personal substance. So she created a pair of wonderful beings: exemplars of all the graces and beauties. The woman was Melancthe; the man was Faude Carfilhiot.

Still all was not done. As the two stood naked and mindless in the workroom, the dross remaining in the vat yielded a rank

green vapor. After a startled breath, Melancthe shrank back and spat the taste from her mouth. Carfilhiot, however, found the reek to his liking and inhaled it with all avidity.

Some years later, the castle Tintzin Fyral fell to the armies of Troicinet. Carfilhiot was captured and hanged from a grotesquely high gibbet, in order to send an unmistakably significant image toward both Tamurello at Faroli to the east and to King Casmir of Lyonesse, to the south.

In due course Carfilhiot's corpse was lowered to the ground, placed on a pyre, and burned to the music of bagpipes and

flutes. In the midst of the rejoicing the flames gave off a gout of foul green vapor, which, caught by the wind, blew out over the sea. Swirling low and mingling with spume from the waves, the fume condensed to become a green pearl which sank to the ocean floor, where eventually it was ingested by a large flounder. est part always breaks first. If I fixed the dead-eyes, then the

## II

SOUTH ULFLAND FACED ON THE SEA from Ys in the south to Suarach in the north: a succession of shingle beaches and rocky headlands along a

coast for the most part barren and bleak. The three best harbours were at Ys and Suarach and at Oaldes, between the two. Elsewhere harbours, good or bad were infrequent, and often no more than coves enclosed by the hook of a headland.

Twenty miles south of Oaldes, a line of crags entered the ocean and with the help of a stone breakwater, gave shelter to several dozen fishing boats. Around the harbour huddled the village Mynault: a clutch of narrow stone houses, two taverns and a marketplace.

In one of the houses lived the fisherman Sarles, a man black-haired and stocky, with heavy hips and a small round



paunch. His face, which was round, pale and moony, showed, a constant frown of puzzlement, as if he found life and logic always at odds.

The bloom of Sarles' youth was gone forever, but Sarles had little to show for his years of more or less diligent toil. Sarles blamed bad luck, although if his spouse Liba were to be believed, indolence was by far the larger factor.

Sarles kept his boat the Preval drawn up on the shingle directly in front of his house, which made for convenience. He had inherited the Preval from his father, and the craft was now old and worn, with every seam leaking and every joint

working. Sarles well knew the deficiencies of the Preval and sailed it out upon the sea only when the weather was fine.

Liba, like Sarles, was somewhat portly. Though older than Sarles, she commanded far more energy and often asked him: “Why are you not out fishing today, like the other men?”

Sarles’ reply might be: “The wind is sure to pipe up later this afternoon; the dead-eyes on the port shrouds simply cannot take so much strain.”

“Then why not replace the dead-eyes? You have nothing better to do.”

“Bah, woman, you understand nothing of boats. The weak-shrouds might part, or a real blow might push the mast-step right through the bottom of the boat.”

“In that case, replace the shrouds, then repair the strakes.”

“Easier said than done! It would be a waste of time and I would be throwing good money after bad.”

“But you waste much time at the tavern where you also throw away good money, and by the handfuls.”

“Woman, enough! Would you deny me my single relaxation?”

“Indeed I would! Everyone else is out on the water while you sit in the sun catching flies. Your cousin Junt left the harbour before dawn to make sure of his mackerel! Why did you not do the same?”

“Junt does not suffer miseries of the back as I do,” muttered Sarles. “Also he sails the Lirlou, which is a fine new boat.”

“It is the fisherman who catches fish, not the boat. Junt brings in six times the catch you do.”

“Only because his son Tamas fishes beside him.”

“Which means that each out-fishes you three times over.”

Sarles cried out in anger: “Woman, when will you learn to curb your tongue? I would be off to the tavern this instant had I one coin to rub against another.”

“Why not use the leisure to repair the Prevail” Sarles threw his hands in the air and went down to the beach where he assessed the deficiencies of his craft. With nothing better to do, he carved a new dead-eye for his shrouds. Cordage was too dear for his pocket, so he performed a set of makeshift splices, which strengthened the shrouds but made an unsightly display.

And so it went. Sarles gave the Preval only what maintenance was needed to keep it afloat, and sallied out among the reefs and rocks only when conditions were optimum, which was not often.

One day even Sarles became alarmed. With a soft breeze blowing on-shore, he rowed from the harbour, hoisted his sprit-sail, set up the back-stay, adjusted the sheets and bow nicely across the swells and out toward the reefs, where fish were most plentiful... . Peculiar! thought Sarles. Why did his back-stay sag when he had only just set it up taut? Making an investigation, he discovered a daunting fact: the stern-post to which the stay was attached had become so rotten

from age and attacks of the worm that it was about to break loose to the tension of the back-stay, thereby causing a great disaster.

Sarles rolled up his eyes and gritted his teeth in annoyance. Now, without fail or delay, he must make a whole set of tedious repairs, and he could expect neither leisure nor wine-bibbing until the repairs were done. To finance the repairs he might even be forced to beg a place aboard the Lirlou, which again was most tiresome, since it meant that he would be forced to work Junt's hours.

For the nonce, he shifted the back-stay to one of the stem-cleats, which, in mild

weather such as that of today, would suffice.

Sarles fished for two hours, during which time he caught a single flounder. When he cleaned the fish, its belly fell open and out rolled a magnificent green pearl, of a quality far beyond Sarles' experience. Marvelling at his good fortune, he again threw out his lines but now the breeze began to freshen, and concerned with the state of his makeshift back-stay, Sarles hoisted anchor, raised his sail and turned his bow toward Mynault, and as he sailed he gloated upon the beautiful green pearl, the very touch of which sent shivers of delight along his nerves.



Once more in the harbour, Sarles beached his boat and set out for home, only to meet his cousin Junt.

“What?” cried Junt. “Back so soon from your work? It is not yet noon! What have you caught? A single flounder? Sarles, you will die in penury if you do not take yourself in hand! Truly you should give the Preval a good work-over and then fish with zeal, so that you may do something for yourself and your old age.”

Nettled by the criticism, Sarles retorted: “What of you? Why are you not out in your fine Lirlou? Do you fear a bit of wind?”

“Not at all! I would fish and gladly, wind or no wind, but for caulking and fresh pitch done to Lirlou’s seams.”

As a rule Sarles was neither clever, spiteful, nor mischievous, his worst vice being sloth and a surly obstinacy in the face of chiding from his spouse. But now, impelled by a sudden tingle of crafty malice, he said: “Well then, if zeal rives you so urgently, there is the Preval; sail out to the reef and fish until you have had enough.”

Junt gave a derisive grunt. “It is a sad comedown for me after working my fine Lirlou. Still, I believe that I will take you at your word. It is odd, but I cannot

sleep well unless I have roused up a good catch of fish from the deep.”

“I wish you good luck,” said Sarles and continued along the jetty. The wind, so he noted, had shifted and now blew from the north.

At the market Sarles sold his flounder for a decent price, then paused to reflect. He pulled the pearl from his pocket and considered it anew: a beautiful thing, though the green luster was unusual and even-it must be admitted-a trifle unsettling.

Sarles grinned a curious mindless grin and tucked the pearl back into his

pocket. He marched across the square to the tavern, where he poured a good half-pint of wine down his throat. The first called for another, and as Sarles started on his second half-pint he was accosted by one of his cronies, a certain Juliam, who asked: "How goes the world? No fishing today?"

"I am not up to it today, owing to my sore back. Also, Junt decided that he wished to borrow Preval and I told him 'Go to it; fish all night, if you are so frantic in your zeal!' So off went Junt in my good old Preval."

"Ah well, that was generous of you!"

“Why not? After all, he is my cousin and blood is thicker than water.”

“True.”

Sarles finished his wine and strolled out to the end of the jetty. He scanned the sea with care but neither to the north, the west, nor the south could he glimpse the patched yellow sail of the Preval.

He turned away and went back along the jetty. Down on the shingle other fishermen were beaching their boats. Sarles went down and made inquiries in regard to Junt. “From the kindness of my heart I let him take out my Preval, though I warned him that the wind was rising

and seemed to be veering to the north.”

“He was out by Scratch Bottom an hour ago,” said one of the fishermen. “Junt will fish while honest men drink wine!”

Sarles scanned the sea. “Possibly true, but I do not see him now. The wind is swinging about and he will be in trouble if

he does not head for the harbour soon.”

“Never fear for an old sea-dog like Junt, in a stout boat such as the Lirlou,” said a fisherman who had just come up. The first fisherman gave a raucous laugh. “But he is aboard the Prevail”

“Aha. That is something else again. Sarles, you would be wise to make repairs.”

“Yes, yes,” muttered Sarles. “In due course. I can neither walk on water nor blow gold coins out of my nose.”

Sunset came and still Junt failed to return to Mynault harbour. Sarles finally reported the circumstances to Liba.

“Today my back was poorly, and I could not fish overlong. From motives of generosity I allowed Junt the use of my boat. He has not yet returned and I fear that he has been blown off down the coast, or even has wrecked the Preval. I suppose this should be a lesson for me.”

Liba stared. “For you? What of Junt and his family?”

“I am concerned on both counts. That goes without saying. However, I have not told you yet of my amazing good luck.”

“Indeed? Your back is well so that finally you can work? Or you have lost your taste for wine?”

“Woman, control your tongue or you will feel the weight of my hand! I am bored with acrid jokes.”

“Well then, what is your luck?”



Sarles displayed the pearl. “What do you think of that?”

Liba looked down at the gem. “Hmm. Curious. I have never heard of a green pearl. Are you sure it is genuine?”

“Of course! Do you take me for a fool? It is worth a goodly sum.”

Liba turned away. “It gives me the chills.”

“Is not that just like a woman? Where is my supper? What! Gruel? Why cannot you cook a tasty pot of soup, like other women?”

“I should work miracles, when the cupboard is bare? If you caught more fish and drank less wine we would eat better.”

“Bah! From now on all will be different.”

During the night Sarles was troubled by unsettling dreams. Fates peered at him through swirls of mist, then spoke gravely aside to each other. Try as he might he could understand none of the comments. A few of the faces seemed familiar, but Sarles could put no names to them.

In the morning Junt still had not returned

in the Preval. By virtue of established custom, Sarles therefore became privileged to fish from the fine new Lirlou. Tamas, Junt's son, wished also to go out aboard the Lirlou but this Sarles would not allow. "I prefer to fish by myself."

Tamas made a hot protest. "That is not reasonable! I must protect my family's interests!"

Sarles raised his finger high. "Not so fast! Are you forgetting that I also have interests? The Lirlou becomes my own until Junt returns me my Preval safe and sound. If you want to fish, you must make other arrangements."

Sarles sailed the Lirlou out to the fishing grounds, rejoicing in the strength of the craft and the convenience of the gear.

Today his luck was unusually good; fish fairly seized at his lines and the baskets in the hold became filled to the brim, and Sarles sailed back to Mynault congratulating himself. Tonight he would eat good soup or even a roast fowl.

Two months passed, during which Sarles profited from fine catches, while nothing seemed to go right for Tamas. One evening Tamas went to the house of Sarles, hoping to make some sort of adjustment in a situation which no one in Mynault considered totally fair, though all agreed that Sarles had acted only

within his rights.

Tamas found Liba alone, sitting by the hearth spinning thread. Tamas came to the middle of the room and looked all around. "Where is Sarles?"

"At the tavern, or so I would expect, pouring his gut full of wine." Liba spoke in a flat voice which held a metallic overtone. She glanced at Tamas over her shoulder, then returned to her spindle.

"Whatever you want you will not get. He is suddenly a man of property, and struts around like a grandee."

"Still, we must have an understanding!" declared Tamas. "He lost his rotten hulk

and gained the Lirlou, at the expense of myself, my mother and my sisters. We have lost everything through no fault of our own. We ask only that Sarles deal fairly with us, and give us our share.”

Liba moved her shoulders in a stony shrug. “It is useless to talk to me. I can do nothing with him. He is a different man since he brought home his green pearl.” She raised her eyes to the mantel, where the pearl rested in a saucer.

Tamas went to look at the gem. He took it up and hefted it in his fingers, then whistled through his teeth. “This is a valuable object! It would buy another Lirlou! It would make me rich!”

Liba glanced at him in surprise. Was this the voice of Tamas, everywhere considered the very soul of rectitude? The green pearl seemed to corrupt with greed and selfishness all those who touched it! She turned back to her spinning. "Tell me nothing; what I do not know I can not prevent. I abhor the thing; it gazes at me like an evil eye."

Tamas uttered a queer high-pitched chuckle: so odd that Liba glanced at him sidelong in surprise.

"Just so!" said Tamas. "It is a time for a righting of wrongs! If Sarles complains, let him come to me!" With the pearl in his hand, he ran from the house. Liba

sighed and returned to her spinning, with a heavy lump of apprehension in her chest.

An hour passed with no sound but the sough of the wind in the chimney and an occasional sputter of the fire. Then came the lurching thud of Sarles' steps as he staggered home from the tavern. He thrust the door wide, stood a moment in the opening, his face round as a plate under the untidy ledges of his black hair. His eyes darted here and there and halted on the saucer; he went to look and found the saucer empty. He uttered a cry of anguish. "Where is the pearl, the lovely green pearl?"



Liba spoke in her even voice. “Tamas came to talk with you. Since you were not here he took the pearl.”

Sarles gave a howl of rage. “Why did you not stop him?”

“It is none of my affair. You must settle the matter with Tamas.”

Sarles moaned in fury. “You could have stayed him; you gave him the pearl!” He lurched at her with clubbed fists; she raised the spindle and thrust it into his left eye.

Sarles clapped his hand to the bloody socket, while Liba stood back, awed by

the magnitude of her deed.

Sarles looked at her with his right eye, and stepped slowly forward. Liba, groping behind her, found a broom of tied withes which she lifted and held ready. Sarles came forward one step at a time. Never taking his eye from Liba, he bent and picked up a short-handled axe. Liba screamed and thrust the broom into Sarles' face, then ran for the door. Sarles seized her hair and, pulling her back, did gruesome work with the axe.

Neighbors had been attracted by the screams. Men seized Sarles and took him to the square. The town elders were summoned from their beds and came

blinking out to do justice by the light of lanterns.

The crime was manifest; the murderer was known, and there was nothing to be gained by delay. Sentence was passed; Sarles was marched to the hostler's barn and hanged from the hay derrick, while the village population stared in wonder to see their neighbor kick and jerk by lantern light.

### III

OALDES, TWENTY MILES NORTH OF MYNAULT, had long served the South Ulfish kings as their seat, though it lacked the grace and historical presence

of Ys, and showed to poor advantage when compared to Avallon and Lyonesse Town. To Tamas, however, Oaldes with its market square and busy harbour seemed the very definition of urbanity.

He stabled his horse and made a breakfast of fish stew at a dockside tavern, all the while wondering where best to sell his wonderful pearl, that he might realize a maximum gain.

Tamas made a guarded inquiry of the landlord: "I put you this question: if someone wished to sell a pearl of value, where would he find the best price?"

“Pearls, eh? You will find small clamor for pearls at Oaldes. Here we spend our miserable few coins on bread and codfish. An onion in the stew is all the pearl most of us will ever see. Still, show me your wares.”

Somewhat reluctantly Tamas allowed the landlord a glimpse of the green pearl.

“A prodigy!” declared the landlord. “Or is it a cunning puddle of green glass?”

“It is a pearl,” said Tamas shortly.

“Perhaps so. I have seen a pink pearl from Hadramaut, and a white pearl from

India, both adorning the ears of sea-captains. Let me look once more on your green jewel... . Ah! It glows with a virulent light! There, yonder, is the booth of a Sephard goldsmith; perhaps he will offer you a price.”

Tamas took the pearl to the goldsmith's booth and laid it upon the counter. “How much gold and how much silver will you pay out for this fine gem?”

The goldsmith pushed a long nose close to the pearl and rolled it with a bronze pick. He looked up. “What is your price?”

Tamas, ordinarily equable, found

himself infuriated by the goldsmith's bland voice. He responded roughly: "I want the full value, and I will not be cheated!"

The goldsmith shrugged narrow shoulders. "The worth of an article is what someone will pay. I have no market for such a fine trinket. I will give a single gold piece, no more."

Tamas snatched the pearl and strode angrily away. And so it went all day. Tamas offered the pearl to everyone who he thought might pay a good price, but met no success.

Late in the afternoon, tired, hungry and

seething with repressed anger, he returned to the Red Lobster Inn, where he ate a pork pasty and drank a mug of beer. At a nearby table four men gambled at dice. Tamas went to watch the play and when one of the men departed, the others invited him to join their game. “You seem a prosperous lad; here’s your chance to enrich yourself even further at our expense!”

Tamas hesitated, since he knew little of dice or gaming. He thrust his hands into his pockets and touched the green pearl, which sent a pulse of reckless confidence coursing along his nerves.

“Certainly!” Tamas cried out. “Why



not?” He slid into the vacant seat. “You must explain your game to me, since I lack experience at such sport.”

The other men at the table laughed jovially. “All the better for you!” said one. “Beginner’s luck is the rule!”

Another said: “The first thing to remember is that if you win your count, you must not forget to collect your wager. Secondly, and even more important from our point of view, if you lose, you must pay! Is that clear?”

“Absolutely!” said Tamas.

“Then, just as a gentlemanly courtesy,

show us the colour of your money.”

Tamas brought the green pearl from his pocket. “Here is a gem worth twenty gold pieces; this is my surety! I have no smaller moneys.”

The other players looked at the pearl in perplexity. One of them said: “It may be worth exactly as you claim, but how do you expect to gamble on that basis?”

“Very simply. If I win, I win and nothing more need be said. If I lose, I lose until I am in debt to the amount of twenty gold pieces, whereupon I give up my pearl and depart in poverty.”

“All very well,” said another of the gamblers. “Still, twenty gold pieces is a goodly sum. Suppose I were to win a single gold piece and thereupon had enough of the game; what then?”

“Is it not absolutely clear?” demanded Tamas peevishly. “You then give me nineteen gold pieces, take the pearl and depart with your gains.”

“But I lack the nineteen gold pieces!”

The third gambler cried out: “Come, let us play the game! No doubt matters will sort themselves out!”

“Not yet!” cried the cautious gambler.

He turned to Tamas. “The pearl is useless in this game; have you no smaller coins?”

A red-haired red-bearded man wearing the varnished hat and striped trousers of a seaman came forward. He picked up the green pearl and scrutinized it with care. “A rare gem, of perfect luster and remarkable colour! Where did you find this marvel?”

Tamas had no intention of telling everything he knew. “I am a fisherman from Mynault, and we bring ashore all manner of marine treasure, especially after a storm.”

“It is a fine jewel,” said the cautious gambler. “Still, in this game you must play with coins.”

“Come then!” cried the others. “Put out your stakes; let the game begin!”

Tamas grudgingly laid down ten coppers, which he had been reserving for the night’s supper and lodging.

The game proceeded and Tamas’s luck was good. First copper, then silver coins rose before him in stacks of gratifying height; he began to play for ever higher stakes, deriving assurance from the green pearl which rested among his winnings.

One of the gamblers abandoned the game in disgust. “Never have I seen such turns of the dice! I cannot defeat both Tamas and the goddess Fortunate!”

The red-bearded seaman, who named himself Flary, decided to join the game. “It is probably a lost cause, but I too will challenge this wild fisherman from Mynault.”

The game proceeded once again. Flary, an expert gambler, secretly introduced a pair of weighted dice into the game, and seizing an appropriate opportunity, placed a wager of ten gold pieces on the board. He called out: “Fisherman, can you meet such a wager?”

“My pearl is security!” responded Tamas. “Start the game!”

Flary cast down the dice and once more, to Flary’s great perplexity, Tamas had won the stakes.

Tamas laughed at Flary’s discomfiture. “That is all for tonight. I have gambled long and hard, and my winnings will buy me a fine new boat. My thanks to you all for a profitable evening.”

Flary pulled at his beard and squinted sidelong as Tamas counted his money. As if on sudden inspiration Flary swooped down upon the table and pretended to inspect the dice. “As I

suspected! Such luck is unnatural! These are weighted dice! We have been robbed!”

There was sudden silence, then an outburst of fury. Tamas was seized, dragged out to the yard behind the tavern and there beaten black and blue. Flary meanwhile retrieved his dice, his gold pieces and also possessed himself of the green pearl.

Well pleased with the night's work, he departed the tavern and went his way.

## IV

THE SKYRE. A LONG BIGHT OF



PROTECTED WATER, separated North Ulfland from the ancient Duchy of Per Aquila, now Godelia, realm of the Celts<sup>2</sup>. Two towns of very different character looked at each other across the Skyre: Xounges, at the tip of a stony peninsula, and Dun Cruighre, Godelia's principal port.

In Xounges, behind impregnable defenses, Gax, the aged king of North Ulfland, maintained the semblance of a court. The Ska, who effectively controlled Gax's kingdom, tolerated his shadowy pretensions only because an attempt to storm the town would cost far more Ska blood than they were willing to spend. When old Gax died, the Ska

would take the town through intrigue or bribery: whichever best served practicality.

Viewed from the Skyre, Xounges showed an intricate pattern of gray stone and black shadow, under roofs of mouldering brown tile. In total contrast, Dun Cruighre spread back from the docks in an untidy clutter of warehouses, hostleries, bams, shipwright's shops, taverns and inns, thatched cottages and an occasional two-story stone manse. The heart of Dun Cruighre was its noisy and sometimes raucous square, often the scene of impromptu horse-races, for the Celts were great ones at contention of any sort.

Dun Cruighre was enlivened by much coming and going, with constant sea-traffic to and from Ireland and Britain. A Christian monastery, the Brotherhood of Saint Bac, boasted a dozen famous relics and attracted pilgrims by the hundreds. Ships from far lands lay alongside the docks, and traders set up booths to display their imports: silk and cotton from Persia; jade, cinnabar and malachite from various lands; perfumed waxes and palm-oil soap from Egypt; Byzantine glass and Rimini faience-all to be exchanged for Celtic gold, silver or tin.

The inns of Dun Cruighre ranged in quality from fair to good: somewhat

better, in fact, than might have been expected, for which the itinerant priests and monks could be thanked, since their tastes were demanding and their pouches tended to chink loud with coin. The most reputable tavern of Dun Cruighre was the Blue Ox, which offered private chambers to the wealthy and straw pallets in a loft to the penurious. In the common room, fowl constantly turned on a spit, and bread came fresh from the oven; travellers often declared that a plump roast pullet, stuffed with onions and parsley, with fresh bread and butter, and a pint or two of the Blue Ox ale made as good a meal as could be had anywhere in the Elder Isles. On fine days service was provided at tables in

front of the inn, where patrons could eat and drink and watch the events of the square, which in this boisterous town never lacked for interest.

Halfway through one such fine morning a person of portly habit, wearing a brown cassock, came to sit at one of the Blue Ox's outside tables. His face was confident and clever, with round alert eyes, a short nose, and an expression of genial optimism. With nimble white fingers and an earnest snapping of small white teeth he devoured first a roast pullet, then a dozen honeycakes, meanwhile drinking grandly of mead from a pewter mug. His cassock, if judged by its cut and the excellence of

its weave, suggested a clerical connection, but the gentleman had thrown back his hood and where once his pate had been shaved clean, a crop of brown hair now once again was evident.

From the common room of the tavern came a young man of aristocratic demeanour. He was tall and strong, clean-shaven and clear of eye, with an expression of tranquil good humor, as if he found the world a congenial place in which to be alive. His garments were casual: a loose shirt of white linen, trousers of gray twill and an embroidered blue vest. He looked right and left, then approached the table

where sat the gentleman in the brown cassock. He asked: "Sir, may I join you? The other tables are occupied and, if possible, I would enjoy the air of this fine morning."

The gentleman in the cassock made an expansive gesture: "Be seated at your pleasure! Allow me to recommend the mead; today it is both sweet and strong, and the honeycakes are flawless. Indeed, I plan an immediate second acquaintance with both."

The newcomer settled himself into a chair. "The rules of your order are evidently both tolerant and liberal."

“Ha ha, not so! The restrictions are austere and the penalties are harsh. My transgressions, in fact, have brought me expulsion from the order.”

“Hmm! It seems an exaggerated response. A sip or two of mead, a taste of honeycake: where is the harm in this?”

“None whatever!” declared the ex-priest. “I must admit that the issues possibly went a trifle deeper, and I may even found a new brotherhood, devoid of those stringencies which too often make religion a bore. I am restrained only because I do not wish to be branded a heretic. Are you yourself a Christian?”



The young man made a negative sign.  
“The concepts of religion baffle me.”

“This inscrutability is perhaps not unintentional,” said the ex-priest. “It gives endless employment to dialecticians who otherwise might become public charges or, at very worst, swindlers and tricksters. May I ask whom I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Of course. I am Sir Tristano of Castle Mythric in Troicinet. And yourself?”

“I also am of noble blood, or so it seems to me. For the nonce, I use the name my father gave me, which is Orlo.”

Sir Tristano, signaling the servant girl, ordered mead and honeycakes for both himself and Orlo. “I assume, then, that you have definitely resigned from the church?”

“Quite so. It makes for a sordid tale. I was called before the abbot that I might answer to charges of drunkenness and wenching. I put forward my views in a manner to enlighten and convince any reasonable person. I assured the abbot that our merciful Lord God would never have created succulent pasties nor smacking ale, not to mention the charms of merry-hearted women, had he not wished these commodities to be enjoyed to the fullest.”

“The abbot no doubt fell back upon dogma for his rebuttal?”

“Precisely! He cited passage after passage from the scriptures to justify his position. I suggested that errors might well have crept into the translation, and that, until we were absolutely sure that self-starvation and tormented glands were the will of our glorious Lord, I proposed that we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. The abbot nevertheless cast me out.”

“Self-interest also guided him; of this I have no doubt!” said Sir Tristano. “If everyone worshipped in the manner he found most congenial, the abbot, and the

pope as well, would find themselves with no one to instruct.”

At this moment Sir Tristano’s attention was attracted by a scene of activity across the square. “What is the commotion yonder? Everyone is dancing and skipping as if they were on their way to a festival.”

“It is indeed a celebration of sorts,” said Orlo. “For close on a year a bloody-handed pirate has been terrorizing the sea. Have you heard the name ‘Flary the Red’?”

“I have indeed! Mothers use the name to frighten their children.”

“Flary is a nonesuch!” said Orlo. “He has elevated cutthroat daring to a pinnacle of virtuosity, and always he has worn a lucky green pearl in his ear. One day he misplaced his pearl, but nevertheless launched an attack. This was his great mistake. What seemed a fat merchantman was a trap, and fifty Godelian fire-eaters swarmed aboard the pirate ship. Red Flary was captured and today he will lose his head. Shall we observe the ceremony?”

“Why not? Such spectacles assert the inevitable triumph of virtue, and we will be better men for the instruction.”

“Well spoken! I could wish that all men

were so rational!”

The two made their way to the executioner’s platform, and here Orlo was prompted to chide a gray-faced little man who sought to rifle his pouch. “Fellow, your conduct is leading you directly up to the executioner’s block! Have you no foresight? I now must turn you over to the guard!”

“Pest take you!” The pickpocket jerked free from Orlo’s grasp. “There were no witnesses!”

“Wrong!” spoke Sir Tristano. “I saw the whole thing! I myself will summon the guard!”

The pickpocket uttered another epithet and, dodging away, was lost in the press.

“A thoroughly unpleasant incident,” said Orlo. “The more so since all hearts should now be gay and all faces radiant with joy.”

Sir Tristano felt impelled to add a qualification: “Save only the heart and face of Flary the Red.”

“That goes without saying.”

From the crowd came muted cries of anticipation as a pair of blackmasked jailers pulled Flary up to the platform.

Behind came a massive man, also masked in black, moving with a stately, even pompous, tread. He carried an enormous axe on his shoulder, and in his wake ambled a priest, smiling first to one side, then the other.

A crier, dressed parti-colour in green and red, jumped to the platform. He bowed toward a construction of raised benches where sat Emmence, Earl of Dun Cruighre, with his friends and family. The crier addressed the throng: “Hear, all ye gracious gentlefolk, as well as all other classes of the region: low, high and ordinary. Hear, I say, and all will learn of the justice imposed by Lord Emmence upon the clapperclaw



Flary the Red! His guilty acts are many and not in dispute; his death is perhaps too merciful. Flary, speak your final words in this world which you have so misused!”

“I sorely regret my capture,” said Flary. “The green pearl betrayed me; it harms all who touch it! I knew that someday it would bring me to the block, and so it has.”

The crier demanded: “Are you not awed as you stand here facing your doom? Is it not time to come to terms with yourself and the world?”

Flary blinked and touched the green

pearl which he wore in his ear. He spoke in a halting voice: "To both questions, I reply in the affirmative, especially to the last. It is time and more than time that I think hard and deep upon such matters, and since there are many incidents and events to review, I hereby request a stay of execution."

The crier looked toward Lord Emmence. "Sir, is this request allowed or denied?"

"It is denied."

"Ah well, perhaps I have thought long enough," said Flary. "The priest has put a choice to me. I may either repent my sins and be shriven, and thereby ascend

to the glories of paradise; or I may refuse to repent, and not be shriven, and thereby suffer forever the torments of Hell.” Flary paused and looked around the crowd. “Lord Emmence, gentlefolk, of ail degrees! Know then; I have made my decision!” He paused again, and held his clenched fists dramatically high, and all the folk present leaned forward to learn fwhat Flary’s decision might be.

Flary cried out: “I repent! I sorely regret those crimes which have brought me to my present shame! To each man, woman and child within my hearing I utter this advice: stray never an inch from the path of rectitude! Bear true faith to your earl, your father and mother and to the great

Lord God, who I hope will now pardon my mistakes! Priest, come now! Shrive me my sins, and send me flying clean and pure heavenward where I may take my place among the angels of the sky and rejoice forever in transcendent bliss!”

The priest stepped forward; Red Flary knelt and the priest performed those rites requested of him.

The priest retreated from the platform. The crowd began to mutter and stir and everywhere there was a craning of necks. Lord Emmence raised his baton and let it fall. The jailers thrust Flary to the block; the executioner raised his axe on high, held it poised, then struck.

Flary's head dropped into a basket. A small green object bounced free, rolled to the edge of the platform, and fell almost at Sir Tristano's feet. Sir Tristano jerked back in distaste. "Look, there is Flary's pearl, red with his blood." He bent his head. "It almost seems alive. See how the blood seethes and crawls along surface!"

"Stand back!" cried Orlo. "Do not touch it! Remember Flary's words!"

From under the platform reached a long thin arm; yhin fingers clutched the pearl. Sir Tristano stamped smartly down upon the bony wrist, and from under the platform came shrill scream of pain and

anger. A nearby guard came to look.

“What is this disturbance?” Sir Tristano pointed under the platform; the guard seized the arm and pulled out a small gray-faced man with a broken nose.

“What have we here?”

“A thief and pickpocket, unless I am very much taken,” said Sir Tristano.

“Examine his pouch and what sort of loot he carries.” The pickpocket was dragged to the platform; his pouch was turned out, yielding coins, brooches, golden chains, clasps and buttons, which folk from the crowd came forward in excitement to claim.

Lord Emmence rose to his feet. “I

discover here an exercise in sheer impudence! While we rid ourselves of one thiet another circulates among us, stealing those valuables and ornaments which we have worn for the occasion. Hangman your axe is sharp! The block is ready! Your muscles are in good tone! Today you shall earn a double fee. Priest, shrive this man and ease his soul for the journey he is about take.”

Sir Tristano told Orlo: “I am sated with head-loppings; Let us return to our mead and honeycakes... . Still, what shall we do with the pearl? We cannot leave it lying in the dirt.

“One moment.” Orlo found a twig,

which he split with knife, then cleverly caught the pearl in the cleft. “In such matters, one cannot be too cautious. Already today we have seen the fate of two who have avidly seized the pearl.”

“I do not want it,” said Sir Tristano. “It is yours.”

“Impossible! Remember, if you will, that I am vowed poverty! Or, better to state, I am reconciled to the condition

Sir Tristano gingerly picked up the twig and the two of them returned to the Blue Ox where they once again sat down to their refreshment. “It is only just noon,” said Sir Tristano. Today I had planned



to set out along the road to Avallon.”

“I am of the same inclination,” said Orlo. “Shall we ride together?”

“Your company is most welcome, but what of the pearl?” .. Orlo scratched his cheek. “Now that I think of it, nothing would be simpler. We will walk to the pier, and drop the pearl in the harbour, and that will be the end of it.”

“Sound thinking! Bring it along, then.” Orlo squinted down at the pearl in distaste. “Like yourself, am made queasy by the sultry gleam of the thing. Still, we in this affair together, and fairness must be observed.” He pointed to a fly which

had settled on the table. “Put down your hand beside mine. I will move first, then you must move, as much or as little as you wish, but you must go always at least beyond my hand. When the fly at last departs in fright, whoever moved his hand last shall carry the pearl.”

“Agreed.”

The trial was made, and each man moved his hand according to his best reading of the fly’s emotion, but eventually, the fly took alarm at Sir Tristano’s sudden move and flew iaway.

Sir Tristano groaned. “Alas! I must carry the pearl!”

“But not for long, and only so far as the dock.” Sir Tristano gingerly lifted the end of the twig and the two crossed the square to a vacant place on the dock, with all the Skyre before them.

Orlo spoke: “Pearl, farewell! We hereby return you to that salt green element from which you originated. Sir Tristano, cast away, and with a will!”

Tristano tossed twig and pearl into the sea. The two watched as the gem sank from view, then returned to their table. Here, clean and wet, they discovered the pearl, directly in front of Tristano’s place, causing the hairs to rise at the back of his neck.

“Ha ha!” said Orlo. “So the thing has decided to play us tricks! Let it beware! We are not without resources! In any event, sir knight, time has not come to a halt and our way is long. Take up the pearl and let us be on our way. Perhaps we shall meet the archbishop, who will be grateful for a gift.”

Sir Tristano dubiously looked down at the pearl. “You then advise that I should carry this object upon my person?”

Orlo held out his hands. “Would you leave it here for some poor wight of a serving boy?”

Sir Tristano grimly split another twig

and took up the pearl in the cleft. “Let us be on our way.”

The two men procured their horses from the stables and departed Dun Cruighre. The road led first along the shore past sandy beaches pounded by surf and, at intervals, fisherman’s hut. As they rode they spoke of the pearl.

Orlo said: “When I reflect upon this strange object, I seem to detect a pattern. The pearl fell to the ground, where it belonged to no one. The pickpocket seized upon it and so it became his. You stamped on the pickpocket’s wrist, and in effect wrested away the pearl and took it into your own custody. But since

you have not touched the pearl, it cannot work its magic upon you.”

“You feel, then, that it can cause me no harm unless I touch it?”

“That is my guess, inasmuch as such an act would represent your intent to partake of the pearl’s evil.”

“I expressly deny any such intent and I hereby state that any contact, should it occur, must be considered accidental by all parties to the incident.”

Sir Tristano looked at Orlo “What is your opinion of that?”

Orlo shrugged. "Who knows? Such a disclaimer may or may not dampen the evil ardor of the pearl."

The road turned inland and presently Sir Tristano pointed ahead. "Mark the bell-tower which rises so high above the trees! It surely signifies the church of a village."

"Undoubtedly so. They are great ones for churches, these Celts; nevertheless they are still more pagan than Christian. In every forest you will find a druid's grove and when the moon shines full they leap through fires with antlers tied to their heads. How does it go in Troicinet?"

“We do not lack for Druids,” said Sir Tristano. “They hide in the forests and are seldom seen. Most folk, however revere the Earthgoddess Gaea, but in an easy fashion, without blood, nor fire, nor guilt. We celebrate only four festivals: to Life in the spring; to the Sun and Sky in the summer; to the Earth and Sea in the Autumn; to the Moon and Stars in the winter. On our birthdays, we place gifts of bread and wine on the votive stone at the temple. There are neither priests nor creed, which makes for a simple and honest worship, and it seems to suit the nature of our people very well... . And there is the village with its grand church, where, unless my eyes deceive me, an



important ceremony is in progress.”

“You are observing the panoplies of a Christian funeral,” said Orlo. He drew up his horse and slapped his leg. “A notable scheme has occurred to me. Let us look in on this funeral.”

Dismounting, the two men tied their horses to a tree and entered the church. Three priests chanted above an open coffin as mourners filed past to pay their last respects.

Sir Tristano asked in a somewhat anxious voice: “Exactly what do you have in mind?”

“I conceive that the holy rites of a Christian burial must effectively stifle the evil force of the pearl. The priests are uttering benedictions by the score and Christian virtue hangs thick in the air. The pearl must surely be confounded, absolutely and forever, when surrounded by such a power.”

“Possibly true,” said Tristano dubiously. “But practical difficulties stand in the way. We cannot possibly intrude upon this mournful rite.”

“No need whatever,” said Orlo in a jaunty fashion. “Let us join the mourners. When we reach the coffin I will distract the priests while you drop the pearl

among the ceremonies.”

“It is at least worth a try,” said Sir Tristano and so the deed was done.

The two stood back to see the coffin lid closed down on corpse and pearl together. Pall-bearers carried the coffin to a grave dug deep into the mold of the churchyard; four sextons lowered the coffin into the grave and, amid the wailing of the bereaved, the coffin was covered with sod.

“A good funeral!” declared Orlo with satisfaction. “I also notice a sign yonder which betokens the presence of an inn, where perhaps you may wish to take

lodging for the night.”

“What of yourself?” asked Sir Tristano.

“Do you not intend to sleep under a roof?”

“I do indeed, but here, sadly enough, our paths diverge. At the crossroad you will bear to the right, along the road to Avallon. I, however, will turn to the left and an hour’s ride will bring me to the manor of a certain widowed lady whose lonely hours I hope to console or even enliven. So then, Sir Tristano, I bid you farewell!”

“Orlo, farewell, and I regret parting with so good a companion. Remember, at

Castle Mythric you will always be welcome.”

“I will not forget!” Orlo rode off down the street. At the crossroad he turned, looked back, raised his arm in farewell and was gone.

Sir Tristano, now somewhat melancholy, rode into the village. At the Sign of the Four Owls he applied for lodging and was conducted up a flight of stairs to a loft under the thatch. His chamber was furnished with a straw pallet, a table, a chair, an old commode and a carpet of fresh reeds.

For his supper Sir Tristano ate boiled

beef, served in its own broth with carrots and turnips, with bread and a relish of minced horseradish in cream. He drank two tall mugs of ale and, fatigued by the exertions of the day, went early to his chamber.

Quiet held the village, and a near-absolute darkness, with an overcast cloaking the sky, until close on midnight, when the clouds broke open to reveal a sad quartering moon.

Sir Tristano slept well until this time, when he was awakened by the sound of slow footsteps in the hall. The door to his chamber squeaked ajar, and footsteps told of a presence slowly entering the

room, and approaching the pallet. Sir Tristano lay rigid. He felt the touch of cold fingers, and an object dropped upon the cloak which covered his chest.

The steps shuffled back across the room. The door eased shut. The steps moved away down the corridor and soon could be heard no more.

Sir Tristano gave a sudden hoarse outcry and jerked up his cloak. A luminous green object fell to the floor and came to rest among the reeds.

Sir Tristano at last fell into a troubled sleep. The cool red rays of dawn, entering the window, awakened him. He

lay staring up at the thatch. The events of last night: were they a nightmare? What a boon, if so! Raising on an elbow, he scrutinized the floor, and almost at once discovered the green pearl.

Sir Tristano arose from his bed. He washed his face, dressed in his clothes and buckled his boots, at all times keeping the green pearl under close surveillance.

In the commode he found a torn old apron which he folded and used to pick up the pearl. With pad and pearl secure in his pouch he left the chamber. After a breakfast of porridge with fried cabbage, he paid his score and went his



way.

At the crossroads he turned right along the road toward the Kingdom of Dahaut, which at last would take him to Avallon.

As he rode, he cogitated. The pearl had not been content with a Christian burial, and it was his until it was taken from him, by force or subterfuge.

During the early afternoon he came into the village Timbaugh. A pack of cur dogs, barking and snapping, raced out to warn him off, and only desisted when he alighted from his horse and pelted them with stones. At the inn he paused for a meal of bread and sausages, and as he

drank ale an idea entered his mind.

With great care he inserted the pearl into one of the sausages, which he took out into the street. The dogs came out again to chide him, snarling and snapping and ordering him out of town. Sir Tristano cast down the sausage. "There it is: my good sausage which belongs to me and no other! I seem to have misplaced it. Whoever takes that sausage and its contents is a thief!"

A gaunt yellow cur darted close and devoured the sausage at a gulp. "So be it," said Sir Tristano. "The act was yours and none of my own."

Returning to the inn, he drank more ale, while turning over the logic of his act. All seemed sound. And yet... .

Nonsense. The dog had exercised a thieving volition. To the dog must now fall the problem of disposing of the pearl. And yet ...

The longer Sir Tristano pondered, the weaker seemed the rationale which had guided his act. A persuasive point could be made that the dog had thought of the sausage as a gift. In this case, the transfer of the pearl must be considered Tristano's rather crude subterfuge, and not in any way a bonafide theft.

Recalling his previous attempts to be rid

of the pearl, Sir Tristano became ever more uneasy, and he began to wonder in what style the pearl might be returned to him.

A tumult in the street attracted his attention: a horrid howling, wavering between shrill and hoarse, which caused his stomach to knot. From along the road came the cry: “Mad dog! Mad dog!”

Sir Tristano hastily threw coins on the table and ran out to his horse, that he might depart the village Timbaugh in haste. He took note of the yellow dog, at a distance of a hundred yards, where it bounded back and forth, foaming at the mouth, meanwhile roaring its opinion of

the world. It launched itself at a peasant lad who trudged beside a hay-cart; the boy leapt up on the hay and, seizing a pitch-fork, thrust down to pierce the dog through the neck. The dog fell over backward, and shaking furiously as if it were wet, bounded away, still trailing the pitch-fork.

An old man trimming the thatch of his cottage, ran inside and emerged with a long-bow; he nocked, drew and let fly an arrow; it drove through the dog's chest, so that the point protruded from one side and feathers from the other; the dog paid no heed.

Glaring up the road, the dog took note of

Sir Tristano, and fixed on him as the source of its travail. Moving at first with sinister deliberation, head low, one leg carefully placed before the other, it approached, then, halting and moaning, it lunged to the attack.

Sir Tristano jumped on his horse and galloped away down the road with the dog, baying and groaning deep hoarse tones, coming in hot pursuit. The pitchfork fell from its neck; it closed in on the horse, and began to leap at its flanks. With sword on high. Sir Tristano leaned low, and slashed down, to split the dog's skull. The dog turned a somersault into the ditch, quivered and lay watching Sir Tristano through glazing yellow

eyes. Slowly it crawled up from the ditch, sliding on its belly, inch after inch. Sir Tristano watched fascinated, sword at the ready. Ten feet from Sir Tristano the dog went into a convulsion, vomited into the road, then lay back and became still. In the puddle it had brought from its belly the green pearl gleamed. Sir Tristano considered the situation with vast distaste. At last he dismounted, and going to a thicket, cut a twig and split the end. Using the same technique as before, he clamped on the pearl and lifted it from the road.

In the near distance a bridge of a single arch spanned a small river. Leading his horse and carrying the pearl as far from

his body as the length of the twig allowed. Sir Tristano marched to the bridge, where he tied his horse to a bush. Clambering down to the stream, he washed the pearl with care, then washed his sword and wiped it dry on a clump of coarse sedge.

A sound attracted his attention. Looking up, he discovered on the bridge a tall thin man with a narrow face, long bony jaw, high broken nose, and long sharp chin. The tall crown of his hat, wound with red and white ribbons, advertised the profession of barber and bloodletter.

Sir Tristano, ignoring the keen scrutiny from above, rolled the pearl in a pad of



cloth and tucked it into his pouch, then climbed back to the road.

The barber, now standing by his cart, doffed his hat and performed a somewhat obsequious salute. “Sir, allow me to state that I sell elixirs against your infirmities; I will barber your hair, shave your face, cut the most stubborn toenails, lance boils, clean ears, and draw blood. My fees are fair, but not mean; you will nevertheless consider the money well-spent.”

Sir Tristano mounted his horse. “I need none of your goods nor services; good day to you.”

“One moment, sir. May I ask where you are bound?”

“To Avallon in Dahaut.”

“You ride a long road. There is an inn at the village Toomish but I suggest that you ride on to Phaidig, where the Crown and Unicorn is justly famous for its mutton pies.”

“Thank you. I will bear your advice in mind.”

Three miles along the road Sir Tristano came to Toomish, and as Long Liam the Barber had suggested, the inn seemed to offer no great comfort. Although the

afternoon was drawing to its close, Sir Tristano continued onward toward Phaidig.

The sun sank into a bank of clouds, and at the same time the road entered a heavy forest. Sir Tristano looked frowningly into the gloom. His choices were two: he could either ride on through the ominously dark woods or return to Toomish and its uninviting inn.

Sir Tristano made his choice. Touching up his horse to a canter. Sir Tristano entered the wood. After a half mile the horse stopped short and Sir Tristano saw that a barricade of poles had been placed across the road.

A voice spoke to his back: “Arms on high! Lest you wish an arrow in the back!”

Sir Tristano raised his arms in the air.

The voice said: “Do not turn, do not glance aside, and offer no tricks! My associate will approach you while I watch down the length of my arrow! Now then, Padraig, about your work! If he so much as quivers, cut him deep with your razor, I mean your knife.”

A rustle of careful steps sounded in the road; hands pulled at the thongs which tied the wallet to Sir Tristano’s belt.

Sir Tristano spoke: “Stop! You are taking the great green pearl!”

“Naturally!” said the voice from a point close behind. “That is the whole point of robbery: to acquire the victim’s valuables!”

“You now have all my wealth; may I depart?”

“By no means! We want your horse and saddlebags too!”

Sir Tristano, assured that a single footpad had waylaid him, clapped spurs to his horse, bent low, and rode pell-mell around the barricade. He looked

over his shoulder to see a very tall man shrouded in a black cloak, with a hood concealing his face. A bow hung at his shoulder; he snatched it free and let fly an arrow, but the light was poor, the target fugitive and the range long; the arrow sang harmlessly away through the foliage.

Sir Tristano galloped his horse until he had won free of the woods, and the threat of pursuit was past. He rode with a light heart; in his wallet he had carried, along with the green pearl, only two or three small silver coins and half a dozen copper groats. For protection against just such events, he carried his gold in his slotted belt.

Full dusk drowned the landscape with purple-gray shadow before Sir Tristano came to Phaidig, and there he took lodging at the Crown and Unicorn, where he was nicely accommodated in a clean private chamber.

As Long Liam the Barber had attested, the mutton pie was of excellent quality, and Sir Tristano felt that he had dined well. Casually he inquired of the landlord: “What of robbers in these parts? Do they often molest travellers?”

The landlord looked over his shoulder, then said: “We hear reports of one who calls himself ‘Tall Toby’ and his favorite resort appears to be the woods

between here and Toomish.”

“I will offer you a hint,” said Sir Tristano. “Are you acquainted with Long Liam the Barber?”

“Of course! He plies his trade everywhere about these parts. He also is a very tall man.”

“I will say no more,” said Sir Tristano.

“Save only this: the correspondence goes somewhat deeper than mere stature, and the King’s Warden might well be interested in the news.”

**V**



LONG LIAM THE BARBER wended his way by lane and by road south into Dahaut, that he might ply his trade at the harvest festivals of the late summer. Arriving at the town Mildenberry, he did brisk trade and one afternoon was summoned to Fotes Sachant, the country house of Lord Imbold. A footman took him into a drawing room, where he learned that, owing to the illness of the valet, he would be required to shave Lord Imbold's face and trim his mustache.

Long Liam performed his duties with adequate proficiency, and was duly complimented by Lord Imbold, who also admired the green pearl in the ring worn

by Long Liam. So distinctive and remarkable did Lord Imbold think the gem that he asked Long Liam to put a price on the piece.

Long Liam thought to take advantage of the situation and quoted a large sum: “Your Lordship, this confection was given to me by my dying grandfather, who had it from the Sultan of Egypt. I could not bear to part with it for less than fifty gold crowns.”

Lord Imbold became indignant. “Do you take me for a fool?” He turned away and called to the footman. “Taube! Pay this fellow his fee and show him out.”

Long Liam was left alone while Taube went to fetch the coins. Exploring the room, he opened a cupboard and discovered a pair of gold candlesticks which inflamed his avarice to such an extent that he tucked them into his bag and closed up the cupboard.

Taube returned in time to notice Long Liam's suspicious conduct, and went to look into the bag. In a panic Long Liam slashed out with his razor, and cut a deep gash into Taube's neck, so that his head fell back over his shoulders.

Long Liam fled from the chamber but was taken, adjudged and led to the gallows.

A crippled ex-soldier named Manting for ten years had served the county as executioner. He did his work efficiently and expunged Long Liam's life definitely enough, but in a style quite devoid of that extra element of surprise and poignancy, which distinguished the notable executioner from his staid colleague.

The perquisites of Manting's position included the garments and ornaments found on the corpse, and Manting came into possession of a valuable green pearl ring which he was pleased to wear for his own.

Thereafter, all who watched Manting declared that they had never seen the

executioner's work done with more grace and attention to detail, so at times Manting and the condemned man seemed participants in a tragic drama which set every heart to throbbing; and at last, when the latch had been sprung, or the blow struck, or the torch tossed into the faggots, there was seldom a dry eye among the spectators.

Manting's duties occasionally included a stint of torture, where again he proved himself not only the adept at classical techniques, but deft and clever with his innovations.

Manting, however, while pursuing some theoretical concept, tended to overreach

himself. One day his schedule included the execution of a young witch named Zanice, accused of drying the udders of her neighbor's cow. Since an element of uncertainty entered the case, it was ordained that Zanice die by the garrote rather than by fire. Manting, however, wished to test a new and rather involved idea, and he used this opportunity to do so, and thereby aroused the fury of the sorcerer Qualmes, the lover of Zanice.

Qualmes took Manting deep into the Forest of Tantrevalles, along an obscure trail known as Ganion's Way, and led him a few yards off the trail into a little glade.

Qualmes asked: “Manting, how do you like this place?”

Manting, still wondering as to the reason for the expedition, looked all about.

“The air is fresh. The verdure is a welcome change from the dungeons. The flowers yonder add to the charm of the scene.”

Qualmes said: “It is fortunate that you are happy here, inasmuch as you will never leave this place.”

Manting smilingly shook his head.

“Impossible! Today I find myself at leisure, and this little outing is truly pleasant, but tomorrow I must conduct

two hangings, a strappado and a flogging.”

“You are relieved of all such duties, now and forever. Your treatment of Zanice has aroused my deep emotion, and you must pay the penalty of your cruelty. Find yourself a pleasant place to recline, and choose a comfortable position, for I am imposing a spell of stasis upon you, and you will never move again.”

Manting protested for several minutes, and Qualmes listened with a smile on his face. “Tell me, Manting, have any of your victims made similar protests to you?”



“Now that I think of it: yes.”

“And what would be your response?”

“I always replied that, by the very nature of things, I was the instrument, not of mercy, but of doom. Here, of course, the situation is different. You are at once the adjudicator, as well as the executioner of the judgement, and so you are both able and qualified to consider my petition for mercy, or even outright pardon.”

“The petition is denied. Recline, if you will; I cannot chop logic with you all day.”

Manting at last was forced to recline on the turf, after which Qualmes worked his spell of paralysis and went his way.

Manting lay helpless day and night, week after week, month after month, while weasels and rats gnawed at his hands and feet, and hornets made their lodges in his flesh, until nothing remained but bones and the glowing green pearl, and even these were gradually covered under the mold.

# Chapter 2

## I

EIGHT KINGS RULED the realms of the Elder Isles. The least of these was Gax, nominal King of North Ulfland, whose decrees were heeded only within the walls of Xounges. In contrast, King Casmir of Lyonesse and King Audry of Oahaut both ruled wide lands and commanded strong armies. King Aillas, whose possessions included three islands: Troicinet, Dascinet and Scola, as well as South Ulfland, guarded his communications through the power of a strong navy.

The other four kings varied as greatly. Mad King Deul of Pomperol had been succeeded by his son, the eminently sane King Kestrel. The ancient Kingdom of Caduz had been absorbed by Lyonesse, but Blaloc, under the rule of bibulous King Milo, retained its independence. Milo had contrived a wonderful ruse, which never failed in its purpose. When envoys from Lyonesse or Dahaut came to enlist Milo's support, he seated them at his table and poured them full of wine, while musicians played jigs and quicksteps, so that the envoys presently forgot their business and cavorted in drunken abandon alongside King Milo.

Godelia and its boisterous population

were in some degree controlled by King Dartweg. The Ska elected their “First Among the First” at ten-year intervals; the current “First” was the strong and able Sarquin.

The eight kings differed in almost every characteristic. King Kestrel of Pomperol and King Aillas of Troicinet were both earnest young men, brave and honorable, but where Kestrel was humorless and diffident, Aillas showed an imaginative flair which sometimes perturbed more settled personalities.

The courts of the eight kings were no less disparate. King Audry spent lavishly upon vanity and pleasure, and

the splendor of his court at Falu Ffail was the stuff of legend. King Aillas used his revenues to build ships for his navy, while King Casmir spent large sums upon espionage and intrigue. His spies were active everywhere, and especially in Dahaut, where they monitored King Audry's every sneeze.

Casmir found information from Troicinet more difficult to secure. He had managed to suborn certain high officials, who transmitted their reports by carrier pigeon, but he relied most heavily upon the master spy "Valdez," whose information was uncannily accurate.

Valdez reported at intervals of about six

weeks. Casmir, shrouded under a hooded gray cloak, went to a storeroom at the back of a wine-merchant's shop, where presently he was joined by a man who might well have been the wine merchant: a person of no great distinction, stocky of physique, clean-shaven, economical of speech, with neat regular features and cold gray eyes.

From Valdez, Casmir learned of four new warships on the ways at the Tumbling River shipyard, two miles north of Domreis. Despite strict security, Valdez was able to report that these ships were light fast feluccas, with catapults hurling iron arrows a hundred yards with sufficient force to open up the

hull of any ordinary vessel. These new ships were intended specifically to defeat the longboats of the Ska and thus hold open the sea-lanes between Troicinet and South Ulfland<sup>3</sup>.

Casmir yielded the point without display of emotion, though inwardly he seethed with rage, and the violent dislike he felt for Aillas exacerbated the situation. Valdez, before his departure, remarked that he had recently recruited new and highly placed sources of information.

“Well done!” said Casmir. “This is the efficient work which we have come to expect from you.”



Valdez turned toward the door, where he paused and seemed about to speak, but once again turned away.

Casmir had noticed the hesitation.  
“Wait! What troubles your mind?”

“No great problem, though I can conceive of possible inconvenience.”

“How so?”

“I am aware that you have informants in Troicinet other than myself, and I suspect that at least one of these is highly placed. From your point of view, this is a happy situation. Still, as mentioned, I have made contact with a person of high

degree who may well cooperate with me, although at the moment he is as timid as a bird. I can work less tentatively and with less chance of cross-purposes if I know the identities of your other informants.”

“The point is well taken,” said Casmir. He reflected a moment, then uttered a small harsh chuckle. “You would be surprised to learn the elevation at which my ears listen! But it is probably better to keep you and these other sources separate. My reasons are not abstract. In case one is discovered and put to the question, the other is safe.”

“True enough.” Valdez took his leave.

## II

SIR TRISTANO. after yielding his green pearl to the robber, traveled through the pleasant countryside of Dahaut, and in due course arrived at Avallon. He found accommodation, changed into suitable garments and presented himself at Audry's palace Falu Ffail.

A haughty footman in blue velvet livery stood by the door. He surveyed Sir Tristano head to toe with a hooded stare, listened with a face of stone as Sir Tristano identified himself, then grudgingly led the way to a foyer, where Sir Tristano enlivened the wait of an hour by watching the fountain where

sunlight, refracting through a dome of crystal prisms, sparkled against the spray.

The High Chamberlain at last appeared. He listened to Sir Tristano's request for an audience with King Audry, and shook his head dubiously. "His Majesty seldom sees anyone without prior arrangements."

"You may announce me as an envoy from King Aillas of Troicinet."

"Very well. Come this way, if you will." He conducted Sir Tristano to a small parlour and left him sitting alone.

Sir Tristano waited an hour, then another, until finally, having nothing better to do, King Audry condescended to receive him.

The High Chamberlain led Sir Tristano through the galleries of the palace and out into the formal gardens. King Audry lounged at a marble table with three of his cronies, watching a bevy of maidens play at bowls.

King Audry, engrossed in making wagers on the game with his friends, could not immediately attend Sir Tristano, who stood quietly appraising the frivolous King of Dahaut. He saw a man large and handsome, somewhat

loose of jowl, moist and round of eye, and heavy in the buttocks. Black curls clustered beside his cheeks; black eyebrows almost met above his long straight nose. His expression was rich and easy; his disposition would seem to be petulant, rather than vicious.

At last, with eyebrows raised, King Audry listened as the chamberlain introduced Sir Tristano: “Your Majesty, this is the emissary from Troicinet: Sir Tristano of Castle Mythric and cousin to King Aillas.”

Sir Tristano performed a conventional bow. “Your Majesty, I am pleased to offer my best respects and the regards of

King Aillas.”

Audry, leaning back, surveyed Sir Tristano through half-closed eyes. “Sir, I must say that for a mission of this importance I would have expected a person of somewhat more august wisdom and experience.”

Sir Tristano smiled. “Sir, I admit that I am only three years older than King Aillas, who perhaps for this reason regards me in the light you mention. Still, if you are dissatisfied, I will instantly withdraw to Troicinet and there express your views to King Aillas. I am sure that he can find a qualified emissary: sage, elderly, of your own

generation. May I have your leave to depart?”

Audry gave a peevish grunt and straightened in his seat.

“Are all Troice so high-handed in their dignity? Before you rush off in a fury, perhaps you will at least explain the regrettable Troice sortie into South Ulfland.”

“Sir, with pleasure.” Sir Tristano glanced at the three courtiers, who sat listening with unabashed interest. “You might prefer to delay our conference until you are alone, since we will touch upon sensitive matters.”



Audry uttered an impatient ejaculation. “Stealth, whispers, intrigue: how I despise them, one and all! Sir Tristano, be acquainted with my philosophy: I have no secrets! Still and however ...” Audry signaled to his cronies who departed with poor grace.

Audry pointed to a chair. “Sit, if you will... . Now then: I continue to wonder as to this madcap Troice expedition.”

Tristano smiled. “I am surprised by your surprise! Two excellent and obvious reasons prompted us into South Ulfland. The first is self-explanatory: the crown devolved upon Aillas through legitimate and ordinary succession, and he went to

claim his due. He found the realm in deplorable order and now works to set things right.

“The second reason is as starkly simple as the first. If Aillas had failed to secure both Kaul Bocach and Tintzin Fyral, which are forts along the way between Lyonesse and South Ulfland, King Casmir would now rule in South Ulfland. Nothing could prevent him from invading your Western March while at the same time attacking you from the south. Then, after you had been safely clapped into a dungeon, he could overwhelm Troicinet at his leisure. We preceded him into South Ulfland and he is now thwarted. So there you have it.”

King Audry gave a cynical snort. “I also perceive an extension of Troice ambition. It adds new dimensions to the charade! I already have problems enough from Godelia and Wysrod, not to mention the Ska who occupy my strong fortress Poelitetz... . Aha there! Well bowled, Artwen! Now then, Mnione, to the attack! Smite your oppressor hip and thigh!” So called King Audry to the maidens playing at bowls. He lifted a goblet of wine to his lips, drank, then poured out a goblet for Sir Tristano. “Be at your ease; this is a careless occasion. Still, I could wish that Aillas had sent a full-fledged plenipotentiary, or even had come himself.”

Sir Tristano shrugged. "I can only repeat what I have said before. King Aillas has imparted to me the full details of his program. When I speak, you listen to his voice."

"I will be blunt," said Audry. "Our common enemy is Casmir. I am at all times ready to unite our forces and end, once and for all, the danger he represents."

"Sir, this idea naturally comes as no surprise to King Aillas-nor to Casmir, for that matter. Aillas responds in these words. At the moment Troicinet is at peace with Lyonesse, a condition which may or may not endure. We are putting

the time to good use. We consolidate our position in South Ulfland; we augment our navy, and if the peace persists a hundred years, so much the better.

“In the meantime the most urgent situation confronting us is the Ska. If we joined you to defeat Lyonesse, the Ska problem would not go away; and we would then confront a new aggressive Dahaut without the counterbalance of Lyonesse. We cannot tolerate a preponderance in either direction, and always must throw our weight behind the weaker antagonist. For the immediate future, this would seem to be you.”

Audry frowned. “Your statement is

almost insultingly crass.”

Sir Tristano refused to be daunted. “Sir, I am not here to please you, but to present facts and listen to your remarks.”

“Hmmf. These, you say, are the words of King Aillas.”

“Precisely so.”

“I gather that you have no high opinion of my military might.”

“Would you care to hear the appraisal we have received at Domreis?”

“Speak on.”

“I will quote the report more or less as it reached us: ‘Above all else, the knights of Dahaut are required to appear on parade with armour shining and all caparisons resplendent, and indeed they make a brave show. In battle, they may not fare so well, since they have been enervated by luxury and are disinclined to the rigors of the campaign. If forced to confront an enemy, no doubt they could wheel their horses in gallant caracoles and defy the foe with insouciant gestures, but all from a safe distance. Archers and pikemen march with full precision, and at the parade are the marvel of all who see them. The compliments have befuddled poor

Audry; he reckons them to be invincible. Again, they are trained to the parade ground, but barely know which end of their weapons is hurtful. They are all overweight and clearly have little stomach for fighting.’ “

Audry said indignantly: “That is a graceless canard! Are you here only to mock me?”

“Not at all. I came to deliver a message, part of which you have just heard. The second part is this: King Casmir well understands your military deficiencies. He has been denied his easy passage through South Ulfland, and now must think of direct attack. King Aillas urges



that you take command of your army away from your favorites and put it into the hands of a qualified professional soldier. He recommends that you abandon your dress parades for field exercises, and spare no one his necessary effort, including yourself.”

Audry drew himself up. “This kind of message verges upon sheer insolence.”

“This is not our intent. We see dangers of which you may not be aware, and we so warn you, if only from motives of self-interest.”

Audry drummed his white fingers on the table. “I am unacquainted with King

Aillas. Tell me something of his nature. Is he cautious or is he bold?”

Sir Tristano reflected. “In truth, I find him a hard man to describe. He is cautiously bold, if that answers your question. His disposition is easy; still he never stands back from a harsh duty. I suspect that often he forces himself, because his nature is mild, like that of a philosopher. He has no taste for war but he recognizes that force and intimidation are the way of the world; hence he studies military tactics and few can match him at sword-play. He abominates torture; the dungeons below Miraldra are empty, yet few criminals or footpads are at work in Troicinet because Aillas

has given them all to the noose. Still, in my opinion, he would abandon the kingship tomorrow to a man he could trust.”

“That should be no problem! Many would gladly take over his post.”

“Those are precisely the ones he would not trust!”

Audry shrugged and drank wine. “I did not ask to be born king, or-for that matter-to be born at all. Still, I am king, and I might as well enjoy my luck to the hilt. Your Aillas, on the other hand, seems victimized by guilt.”

“I hardly think so.”

Audry filled his own and Sir Tristano’s goblets. “Let me send back with you a message for King Aillas.”

“I listen, sir, with both ears.”

Audry leaned forward and spoke in sententious tones: “It is time that Aillas should marry! What better match could be made than that between Aillas and my eldest daughter Thaubin, thus uniting two great houses? Look, see her yonder where she watches the game!”

Sir Tristano followed the direction of Audry’s gesture. “The comely lass in

white beside the plain little creature so uncomfortably pregnant? She is indeed charming!”

Audry spoke with dignity. “The maiden wearing white is Thaubin’s friend Netta. Thaubin stands beside her.”

“I see... . Well, I doubt if Aillas plans an early marriage. He might well be surprised if I were to affiance him to the Princess Thaubin.”

“In that case-”

“One more matter before I depart. May I speak with candor?”

Audry grumbled: “You have done little else! Speak!”

“I must warn you that traitors report your every act to King Casmir. You are surrounded by spies; they masquerade as your intimates; they might include one or more of the gentlemen who just now sat here with you.”

Audry stared at Sir Tristano, then threw back his head and laughed hugely. He turned and called to his friends: “Sir Huynemer! Sir Rudo! Sir Swanish! Join us, if you will!”

The three gentlemen, somewhat puzzled and resentful, returned to the table.

King Audry, among chuckles, told them: “Sir Tristano insists that traitors are rife at Falu Ffail; indeed he suspects that one among you spies for King Casmir!”

The courtiers jumped to their feet, roaring in anger. “This fellow insults us!”

“Give us leave to show our steel; we will teach him the etiquette he has failed to learn elsewhere!”

“Poppycok and hysteria! The gabble of geese and old women!”

Sir Tristano smilingly sat back in his chair. “It appears that I have touched a

sore nerve! Well, I will say no more.”

“It is all absurdity!” declared King Audry. “What are my secrets that spies should seek them out? I have none! The worst is known!”

Sir Tristano rose to his feet. “Your Majesty, I have brought you my messages; give me leave to depart.”

King Audry waved his fingers. “You may go.” Sir Tristano bowed, turned away and departed Falu Ffail.

### III

SIR TRISTANO. RETURNING TO



DOMREIS, went directly to Miraldra, a dour old castle of fourteen towers overlooking the harbor. Aillas greeted his cousin with affection. The resemblance between them, as they faced each other, was noticeable. Where Tristano was tall and loosely muscular, Aillas, less tall by an inch, seemed spare and taut. Their hair alike was light golden brown and cut square at ear-level; Tristano's features were blunt where those of Aillas were crisp. Standing together and smiling in the pleasure of each other's company, they seemed like boys.

At Aillas' suggestion they seated themselves on a couch. Aillas said:

“Before all else, let me mention that I am on my way to Watershade; why not join me?”

“I will be happy to do so.”

“We shall leave in two hours. Have you had your breakfast?”

“Only a dish of bread and curds.”

“We shall repair that.” Aillas called the footman and presently they were served a pan of fried hake, with new loaves and butter, stewed cherries and bitter ale. Meanwhile Aillas had asked: “How went your expedition?”

“Certainly it has included interesting episodes,” said Sir Tristano. “I debarked from the ship at Dun Cruighre, and rode to Cluggach where I was granted an audience with King Dartweg. Dartweg is a Celt, true, but not all Celts are red-faced louts smelling of cheese. Dartweg, for instance, smells of ale, mead, and bacon. I learned nothing of profit from King Dartweg; the Celts think only of drinking mead and stealing each other’s cattle: this is the basis of their economy. I firmly believe that they place higher value upon a brindle cow with large udders than upon an equally buxom woman. Still, I cannot fault King Dartweg’s hospitality; in fact, you can

insult a Celt only by calling him mean. They are too excitable to make truly good warriors, and, while obstreperous, they are as unpredictable as virgins. At a moot-place near Cluggach I saw fifty men at loggerheads, shouting each other down, and often laying hands to their swords. I thought that they must be debating between peace and war, but, so I found, the dispute concerned the largest salmon caught during a season three years back, and Dartweg was in the midst, bawling the loudest of all. Then a druid appeared in a brown robe with a sprig of mistletoe pinned to his hood. He uttered a single word; all fell silent, then slunk away and hid in the shadows.

“Later I spoke of the incident to Dartweg and commended the druid’s counsel of moderation. Dartweg told me that the druid cared not a fig for moderation, and objected only because the noise offended a flock of sacred crows in a nearby grove.

“Despite the Christian churches which are now appearing everywhere, the druids still hold power.”

“Very well!” said Aillas. “You have told me enough of Godelia. To gain influence I must either ride down from the sky on a white bull holding the disk of Lug, or catch the largest salmon of the season. What next?”

“I crossed the Skyre by ferry and entered Xounges. This is the only access, since the Ska control the approaches by land. Gax lives in a monstrous stone palace named Jehaundel, under ceilings lost in the high shadows. The halls are like caverns, and afford little comfort to visitors, courtiers or Gax himself.”

“But you were able to meet with Gax?”

“Only with difficulty. Gax is now something of an invalid, and his nephew, a certain Sir Kreim, apparently tries to insulate Gax from visitors, claiming that Gax’s health can not suffer excitement. I paid a gold crown to ensure that Gax knew of my presence, and was called to

an audience despite the disapproval of Sir Kreim.

“Gax in his prime must have been a most impressive man. Even now he overlooks me by two inches. He is lean and spare, and talks in a voice like the north wind. His sons and daughters are dead; he does not know his own age but reckons it to exceed seventy years. No one brings him news; he thought that Oriante still reigned in South Ulfland. I assured him that Aillas, the new king of South Ulfland, was a sworn enemy of the Ska, and already had sunk their ships and barred them from South Ulfland.

“At this news King Gax clapped his

hands in joy. Sir Kreim, who stood at Gax's elbow, declared that Aillas' rule was transitory, and why? The reason, according to Sir Kreim, was well-known: Aillas' sexual perversions had made him sickly and limp. This caused Gax to spit on the floor. I declared this 'well-known fact' to be a slanderous lie, untrue in every detail. I stated that whoever had imparted such news to Sir Kreim was a debased and dastardly liar, and I advised Kreim never to repeat the allegation lest he be accused of perpetuating the lie.

"I pointed out that Sir Kreim was otherwise mistaken: that Aillas even now energetically worked to curb the



highland barons, and would soon rebuff the Ska.”

Aillas gave a sour chuckle. “Why did you not also promise that I would reverse the course of the rivers and cause the sun to rise in the west?”

Sir Tristano shrugged. “You have not previously so much as hinted of these ambitions.”

“All in good time,” said Aillas. “First I have fleas of my own to scratch. But tell me more of King Gax and the sinister Sir Kreim.”

“Kreim is somewhat older than myself,

with a purple mouth and a black beard. He is surly and suspicious, and almost certainly a creature of the Ska.

“I mentioned other events of the last year and King Gax had known none of them. The old rascal seems well aware of Kreim’s ambitions, and apparently from sheer mischief kept turning to him and crying out: ‘Kreim, fancy that!’ And: ‘Kreim, these are the men we must count on if ever we are to escape the toils of the Ska!’ And: ‘Kreim, were I once again young, I would do as Aillas does!’

“Finally King Gax sent Sir Kreim away on one pretext or another. Sir Kreim went reluctantly, looking back over his

shoulder all the way. King Gax then told me: ‘As you see, my life and my reign together are dwindling into oblivion.’

“Here King Gax looked all around, as if to assure himself against eavesdroppers. ‘I have made many mistakes in my life. There is one last mistake I wish not to make.’

“And that is”

“Gax only waved a finger at me. ‘You are a subtle young man, despite your easy mask. Can you not guess?’

“I can guess of a dozen mistakes you might make. You hope to avoid dying

before your time, and so perhaps you walk a narrow line.”

“That is one of the right guesses. I am dying, but only in the sense that every man of my age is dying. The Ska are patient; they will wait. But I must be prudent, because I fear poison or a knife in the dark, and it would be a cold death here in Jehaundel, with no son to avenge my murder.’

“Let me ask this, from simple curiosity. How do the laws of North Ulfland regulate the succession of kings?”

“By the ordinary lines of descent, if I die and am dead, which means Kreim. But

see this circlet on my head? Were you fool enough to accept it, I could transfer the kingship to you at this moment, and then, like mine, your life would be in pawn to the Ska and you would wonder at every mouthful of food.”

“Keep your kingship,” I told him. “My ambitions fly much lower.”

“At thus moment Sir Kreim returned, and I took my leave of King Gax.”

Aillas went to look out the window, across the harbour where the wind blew up white-caps. “How do you judge his health?”

“For a man of seventy, he seems sound, though his eyes are not so keen as before. His mind is agile and his voice is steady.”

“And after you left Xounges?”

“I had a most curious adventure involving an evil green pearl, which I joyfully relinquished to a robber, then proceeded across Dahaut to Avallon.”

“I had an audience with King Audry in his palace. He is pompous and foolish and vain, but he shows a sense of humor, which is a trifle ponderous; still it exists.

“I warned him that spies infested his household, and he laughed in my face. Since he had no secrets of any kind, Casmir wasted his money, which suited Audry perfectly well. There is nothing much more to tell, except that Audry is willing that you should marry his pregnant daughter Thaubin.”

“This I am not ready for.”

A footman entered and muttered into Aillas' ear. Aillas screwed up his face and turned to Tristano. “Wait for me in the yard; for this business I am committed to privacy.”

Tristano departed and a moment later

Yane came into the room, so quietly that the air seemed not to stir behind him.

Aillas jumped to his feet. "Once more you are back and once more I can breathe again!"

"You over-estimate the danger," said Yane.

"If you were taken, you would sing a different song."

"No doubt. Sing I would, loudly and quickly, and hope to avoid Casmir's persuasions. There are few men I fear. He is one of them."



Aillas again went to look out the window. “He must have other spies beside yourself.”

“He does indeed, and one of them is a traitor among your close advisors. Casmir almost named me his name, then thought better of it. But this man sits in a high place.”

Aillas pondered. “I wonder how close and how high.”

“Very high and very close.”

Aillas shook his head pensively. “I find it hard to believe.”

“You confer often with your ministers?”

“Every week, at least.”

“These ministers are the same, from week to week?”

“There is no great change.”

“What are their names?”

“They are six, all lords of the realm: Maloof. Pirmence. Foirry. Sion-Tansifer. Langlark. Witherwood. None could gain by Casmir’s victory.”

“Which have cause for resentment?”

Aillas shrugged. “Perhaps I am reckoned

too young or too reckless or too headstrong. The South Ulfland expedition is not everywhere popular.”

“Which of the six is the most zealous?”

“Probably Maloof, who is Chancellor of the Exchequer. All are apt to their work. Langlark at times seems listless, but I have reason to exempt him from suspicion.”

“What reason is this?”

“I have tried to put the event out of my mind-now, it seems, wrongly. In Blaloc, as you know, shipyards build fishing boats and coastal traders. Recently a

certain Duke Geronius of Armorica contracted for the construction of four heavy war-galleasses, of a class which could easily give us trouble on a calm day. Upon inquiry I discovered that Duke Geronius of Armorica is non-existent. He is Casmir, trying to create a navy on the sly. As soon as the ships are launched and Casmir has paid over his gold, I will send a force and burn them to the waterline, and there will be a great gnashing of teeth in Haidion Palace.”

“So then?”

“During a conference, with four ministers present, I mentioned rumors of

ship-building at Port Posedel in Blaloc. I mentioned that I had asked a merchant dealing in glass bottles, now on his way to Port Posedel, to look into the matter.

“The merchant never returned. I made inquiries at his factory and discovered that he had been murdered in Blaloc.”

Yane nodded in slow rumination. “And the ministers who listened to your remarks?”

“Maloof, Sion-Tansifer, Pirmence and Foirry. Langlark and Witherwood were not present.”

“The incident would seem significant.”

“Exactly so. But enough for now. I am off to Watershade with Tristano and Shimrod, where, if you will believe it, there is a vexing problem to be solved. With Shimrod’s help, the problem may dissolve and we will have a few days of simple peace. Would you care to join the company?”

Yane excused himself. “I must go to my place Skave, and make sure of kegs for the new wine. What troubles the placid ways of Watershade?”

“The druids. They have settled the island Inisfadhe, where they put a fine fright into Glyneth, and I must set things to rights.”

“Send Shimrod out to throw a gloom on them, or, better, transform them all into crayfish.”

Aillas looked over his shoulder as if to make sure that Shimrod was not within earshot. “Shimrod already wonders at my sudden invitation. When dealing with druids, magic is a comforting convenience. I will let Glyneth tell her story; she can twist Shimrod around her finger, and any other man she chooses to wheedle.”

“Including a certain Aillas, so I have noticed.”

“Yes. A certain Aillas very much so.”

# Chapter 3

## I

WATERSHADE HAD BEEN BUILT during a long-past time of troubles, to guard the traffic on Janglin Water and to overawe the warrior knights of the Ceald, and never had it so much as come under assault.

The castle stood at the very edge of the lake, with part of the barrel-shaped keep rising from the water itself. Low conical roofs capped both the keep and the four squat towers adjoining. Trees overshadowed both towers and keep,



and softened the castle's mass, while the quaint conical roofs seemed almost comically inadequate to the task of sheltering the heavy structures below.

Aillas' father Ospero had built a terrace around the base of the keep, where it shouldered into the lake. On many a summer evening, while sunset faded into dusk, Aillas and Ospero, perhaps with guests, took supper on the terrace, and often, if the company was good, sat long over nuts and wine and watched the stars come out.

On the shore grew several large fig trees, which during the heat of summer exhaled a pervasive sweetness attracting

countless droning insects; the boy Aillas was not infrequently stung as he clambered among the smooth gray boughs after fruit.

The keep encompassed a great round hall containing a dining table in the shape of a C thirty feet in diameter at which fifty persons could sit in comfort, or sixty with somewhat less elbow-room. Ospero's library occupied the floor above, along with a gallery, several parlours and retiring rooms. The towers housed airy bedchambers and pleasant sitting-rooms for the lord of the castle, his family and guests.

When the court moved to Domreis the

moat was neglected and at last became a quagmire choked with reeds, blackberry thicket and scrub willow. Fetid odors rose from the slime and at last Aillas ordained restoration. Work-gangs were employed three months; then finally the gates were opened and fresh water rushed once again into the channel, though the moat now served only domestic purposes. During storms boats were brought in from the lake and moored in the moat. Ducks and geese paddled among the reeds, and the calm waters were fished for carp, eels and pike.

For Aillas, Watershade was the scene of his most pleasant memories, and across

the years changes were few. Weare and Flora now used the titles ‘Seneschal’ and ‘Chatelaine of the House’. Cern, once a stableboy and Aillas’ playmate, had become ‘Under-Master of the Royal Stable’. Tauncy, the one-time bailiff, had gone lame. As ‘Master Vintner to the Royal Estates’, he controlled the work of Aillas’ winery.

After long delay, and only at the behest of Weare, Aillas agreed to move into his father’s old chambers, while Dhrun took over those rooms once used by Aillas.

“So it must be,” Weare told Aillas.

“There is no stopping the fall of the autumn leaves, nor the coming of new

leaves in the spring. As I have often remarked to Dame Flora, you are perhaps over-inclined to sentimentality. Now, all has changed! How can you hope to rule a kingdom if you are too timid to venture from your childhood nursery?"

"Weare, dear fellow, you have put a hard question! If truth be known, I am not anxious to rule a kingdom, much less three. When I am here at Watersshade, it all seems a joke!"

"Nevertheless, things are as they are, and I have heard good reports of you. Now it is only proper that you occupy the High Chambers."

Aillas gave an uncomfortable grimace. “No doubt but what you are right, and you shall have your way. Still I feel my father’s presence everywhere! If you must have the truth, sometimes I think to see his ghost standing on the balcony, or looking into the embers when the fire burns low.”

Weare made a scornful sound. “What of that? I see good Sir Ospero often. On moonlight nights, should I step into the library, he will be sitting in his chair. He turns to look at me, and his face is placid. I suspect that he loved Watershade so dearly that even in death he can not bear to depart.”

“Very well,” said Aillas. “I hope that Sir Ospero. will forgive my intrusion. I will change none of his arrangements.”

Again Weare found cause for protest.

“Now then, lad! That is not as he would want it, since he loved you as well! The chambers are now yours and you must arrange them to your own taste, not to those of a ghost.”

“So it shall be! Well then, what would you suggest?”

“First, a good scraping, scouring and re-waxing of the woodwork. Then a careful over-wash of the plaster. The green, so I have noticed, tends to go dingy with

time; why not try a nice pale blue with yellow for the moldings?”

“Perfect! Exactly what is needed! Weare, you have a rare talent for such matters!”

“Also, while we are on the subject, perhaps we should renovate the Lady Glyneth’s chambers. I will of course consult with her, but I suggest that we plaster over the stone and use washes of pink and white and yellow, for good cheer and happy awakenings!”

“Just so! Look to it, Weare, if you will!”

In the case of Glyneth, Aillas had fixed



upon her a pretty little estate in a valley not far from Domreis, but she showed no great interest in the property and much preferred Watersshade. Now fifteen years old, Glyneth, for the grace and charm of her own life, and the enlivenment of her friends, used a mingling of limpid simplicity and sunny optimism, together with a joyous awareness of the world's absurdities. During the previous year she had grown taller by an inch, and though she liked to wear a boy's trousers and blouse, only a person blind to beauty could mistake her for a boy.

Dame Flora, however, considered not only her garments but her conduct unconventional. "My dear, what will

folk think? When does a princess sail out on the lake in a cockboat? When does one find her climbing trees and perching among the owls? Or wandering the Wild Woods alone like a hoyden?”

“I wish I might meet such a princess,” said Glyneth. “She would make me a fine companion; our tastes would be exactly alike!”

“I doubt if two like her exist!” declared Dame Flora. “It is time that this present princess learns the uses of propriety, so that she will not disgrace herself at court.”

“Dame Flora, have pity! Would you cast

me out, perhaps into the cold and rain, merely because I cannot sew a fine seam?”

“Never, my darling! But we must observe, we must learn, and we must practice the dictates of etiquette! You have reached the age and come into certain attributes of the body which make trousers altogether unsuitable, and we must plan for you a wardrobe of pretty frocks.”

“Still, we must be practical! How can I jump a fence in a pretty frock? Ask yourself that!”

“It is not necessary that you jump fences!

I jump no fences. Lady Vaudris of Hanch Hall jumps no fences. Before long suitors of high degree will be trooping out here by the score to ask your hand in marriage. When they arrive and wish to pay their respects, and when they ask, I must say: ‘You will find her somewhere about the estate, either here or there.’ So off they go to look, and what will they think when they find you dangling in a tree, or catching frogs in the moat?”

“They will think that they do not want to marry me, which is exactly to my taste.”

At this, Dame Flora aimed a spank at Glyneth’s bottom, but Glyneth dodged nimbly aside. “That is the art of agility.”

“Shameless little hussy, you will come to a bad end!” Flora spoke without heat, and indeed she was grinning to herself. A moment later, for a special treat, she gave Glyneth a dish of lemon cakes.

Glyneth wore her curling golden hair loose, or tied with a black ribbon. While apparently artless, she sometimes indulged in games of mild flirtation, which she played as a kitten pretends the predacity of the jungle. Often she used Aillas as the subject of her experiments, until Aillas, gritting his teeth and turning his eyes to the sky, by main force of will drew back lest he take the game into an area where relationships might forever be altered.

Sometimes, lying abed of nights, he wondered what went on in Glyneth's mind, and how serious she was in her play. Always at these times other images came to disturb him.

These were no longer dreary recollections of the secret garden at Haidion. Suldrun had long become a misty shape lost and gone across the gulfs of time. Another more vital figure marched through Aillas' mind. Her name was Tatzel; she was Ska, and she lived at Castle Sank in North Ulfland. Tatzel's style was unique. She was slim as a wand, with dark hair hanging loose past her ears; her complexion, like that of all the Ska, was pale olive; her eyes glowed

with intelligence. Aillas had seen her most usually striding along the main gallery of the castle, looking neither right nor left. She took no notice of Aillas; as a slave, he was of less concern to her than a chair.

Aillas could not easily define his feelings toward Tatzel. There was resentment and challenge, generated by his abraded self-esteem, but other more subtle yearnings had brought him queer little pangs whenever she walked past unseeing; he wanted to step forward to where she must stop to notice him, to look into his eyes and take heed of his own prideful being. Never could he have dared to touch her; she would have

instantly cried out for the guards and Aillas would have been dragged away in disgrace, perhaps even to the gelding-board and a future too awful to contemplate, with both his manhood and all hope of Tatzel's good opinion forever lost and gone.

When finally Aillas had escaped Castle Sank in company with Cargus and Yane, he had turned at one point, and, looking back, had muttered: "Tatzel, take heed! Someday we shall meet again, and on different terms, so it may be!" And such was the phantom haunting Aillas' mind.

## II



AFTER PASSING THE NIGHT AT HAG HARBOUR, and at noon crossing over Green Man's Gap, Aillas and Tristano late in the afternoon rode clattering across the drawbridge and into the stable-yard at Watershade. Dhrun and Glyneth ran out to greet them, followed by Weare, Flora and others of the household, while Shimrod<sup>4</sup> waited in the shadow of the arched passage leading out upon the terrace.

The travelers retired to their chambers to refresh themselves, then came down to the terrace, where Weare served the best supper his larders could afford, and the company sat long while the afterglow faded and dusk became night.

Tristano told of the green pearl and its sinister infection. “I am baffled by the power of the object! It seemed a true pearl, except for its colour, which was the green of sea-water! Shimrod, what do you make of it?”

“I am ashamed to admit that, for me, in the realm of magic there is far more unknown than known. The green pearl is beyond my conjecture.”

“It might have been the brain-stone of a demon,” mused Glyneth. “Or perhaps a goblin’s egg.”

“Or a basilisk’s eye,” suggested Dhrun.

Glyneth said thoughtfully: "There is a valuable lesson here, say, for a youth in his formative years, like Dhrun. Never steal or rob objects of value, especially if they are green!"

"Good advice!" declared Tristano. "In cases of this sort, honesty is the best policy."

"You have frightened and daunted me," said Dhrun. "I will stop stealing at once."

"Unless, of course, it is something nice for me," said Glyneth. Tonight, perhaps to please Dame Flora, she wore a white frock and a silver fillet enameled with

white daisies to contain her hair; she made a charming picture, to which Tristano was by no means oblivious.

Tristano said modestly: “My conduct at least was exemplary. I took the pearl only as a public service and I gave it up willingly to one less fortunate in his birth than myself.”

Dhrun said: “Here, evidently, you refer to the dog, since we have no knowledge of the robber’s lineage.”

Glyneth spoke severely: “Your treatment of the dog was truly rather heartless! You should have brought the pearl to Shimrod.”

“So that he might feed it to me in a sausage?” demanded Shimrod. “I prefer it otherwise.”

“Poor Shimrod!” murmured Aillas.

“Foaming at the mouth, running down the road at full speed, halting only to bite passersby!”

Glyneth said with dignity: “Shimrod could properly dispose of the thing, whatever its nature. The dog lacks this competence.”

“I now understand my mistake,” said Tristano. “When this dog came to snap at my horse’s heels, I admit that I lacked kindly feeling for the beast. I therefore

acted on an impulse which almost instantly I regretted, and more when I saw the disreputable quality of the beast.”

“I do not quite understand,” said Glyneth. “You almost instantly regretted your cruelty?”

“Well, not altogether. Remember that I indemnified the dog with a sausage for his risk.”

“Why, then?”

Tristano gave a fastidious flutter of the fingers. “Since you press me, I will explain, and as delicately as possible.

On the previous midnight the pearl was returned to me in an uncanny fashion. As I considered the dead dog, I thought at first to depart at full speed and to leave the dog behind. Then I began to ponder on the night ahead: specifically, on the hour of midnight while I lay asleep. At this time the pearl would have progressed well on its way along the dog's digestive tract-”

Glyneth clapped her hands over her ears. “That is enough. Already you have told me more than I want to hear.”

“The subject would seem to lack any further interest,” said Aillas.

“Just so,” said Tristano. “I only wanted to excite Glyneth’s compassion for the travail to which I was subjected.”

“You have done so,” said Glyneth.

There was a moment of quiet, and Glyneth looked up the table to Aillas. “Tonight you are quiet! What troubles you? Affairs of state?”

Aillas looked off across the dark water. “Miraldra seems a thousand miles away. I wish that I need never go back.”

“Perhaps you take too much responsibility upon yourself.”



“With my counselors and ministers all older men, watching to catch me out in mistakes, I have no choice except to go carefully. There is a chaos in South Ulfland which I must organize, and perhaps come to grips with the Ska, unless they mend their ways. And all the while, even as we sit here, Casmir hatches new plots.”

“Then why not work plots upon Casmir, until he desists?”

“If only it were so easy! Clever plots are Casmir’s specialty; I can never beat him at intrigue. His spies are everywhere; they would know my clever plots before I know them myself!”

Dhrun made a sound of outrage. “Can we not identify the spies and drown them all in the Lir?”

“Nothing is ever simple. Naturally, I want to identify them, but thereafter I prefer to make their life easy and befuddle them with false information. If I drowned them all, Casmir would merely send over a group of strangers. So I make do with the lot I have and try not to cause them anxiety.”

“This ‘befuddling’ seems a clever plot in itself,” said Glyneth. “Is it effective?”

“I will know better after I identify the spies.”

Glyneth asked: “Certainly our own spies keep watch on Casmir?”

“Not as carefully as he watches us. Still, we are not utterly overmatched.”

“In some ways, it seems an interesting business,” said Glyneth. “I wonder if I would do well as a spy.”

“Beyond a doubt,” said Aillas.

“Beautiful girls make excellent spies! Still, they must be dedicated to their work, and take the good with the bad, since the choicest items are usually told to them in the dark.”

Glyneth made a scornful sound. “And

these are the spies you befuddle all night long, and make their lives easy, rather than hanging them on the gibbet!”

“Ha! No such luck! Casmir is not so considerate! He subverts one of my close counselors instead. Needless to say, impart this knowledge to no one!”

Dhrun said: “It must be a strange feeling to look from face to face and wonder which conceals the spy.”

“It is just that, indeed.”

Tristano asked: “How many are the suspects?”

“They are my six august and irreproachable ministers: Maloof, Langlark, Sion-Tansifer, Pirmence, Foirry and Witherwood. Each is a lord of the realm! In all logic each should be as faithful to me as the moon to the sun. Nevertheless, one of the lot is a traitor. I say this with embarrassment, since it grinds at my self-esteem.”

“And how will you find him out?”

“I wish I knew.” For a period, while the stars moved across the sky, the party discussed schemes for exposing the traitor. At last, when candles guttered low, they rose yawning to their feet and took themselves off to bed.

### III

THE VISITORS MADE READY to return to Domreis. Glyneth and Dhrun, as they watched the preparations, became ever more restless; Watershade would seem quiet and lonely when the company had gone. Also, both had become intrigued by the mystery of the highly-placed spy. At the last minute, the two decided to join the group returning to Domreis, and hastily made their own preparations.

Across the Ceald rode the party, now five: up to Green Man's Gap where, as was the custom, all turned for a final glimpse of Watershade, then down

Rundle River Valley to Hag Harbour and a night at the Sea Coral Inn. Then: an early departure, with harness jingling loud in the pre-dawn chill and up over Cape Haze with the first red rays of day shining wan on their backs, and, early in the afternoon, arrival at Domreis.

Aillas was not deceived as to the purposes of Dhrun and Glyneth. He took them aside and cautioned them to the most extreme discretion. "This is far from a game of quick wits and good-fellowship! There are lives at stake and Casmir cares nothing of how he spends them!"

"He must be a strange, harsh man!" said

Dhrun.

“He is indeed, and one of his spies watches us at close range, as we might watch chickens going about their affairs in the barnyard.”

Glyneth asked in perplexity: “This spy of course is a traitor, but what could be his purpose? Where is his gain?”

Aillas shrugged. “Perhaps he spies from caprice, from the thrill of playing a dangerous game. Certainly he will be the most suspicious of men, alert to every glance and whisper, so be subtle!”

“I think that you can trust us,” said Dhrun



with dignity. “We are not absolute fools; we do not intend to glance and nudge each other, or peek quickly, then whisper together.”

“I know this very well,” said Aillas. “In fact, I am curious to learn your opinions!” And Aillas thought to himself: Who knows? One or the other might perceive discords or inconsistencies overlooked by others.

For such reasons Aillas arranged a banquet to which he invited his ministers and a few others. The event took place on a cheerless afternoon, with the wind veering down from a hard blue sky. With garments flapping and hands to hats, the

dignitaries rode out along the causeway to Miraldra. In the foyer they were met by Sir Este the Seneschal, who conducted them to the smallest of the banquet halls. Here, Aillas with Dhrun and Glyneth awaited the company.

On this informal occasion the six ministers were seated in order of their arrival, three to each side of the table, without reference to precedence. Beyond were placed Sir Tristano and two noblemen of foreign parts. The first of these was a gentleman tall and spare, with a wry long-jawed face, who called himself Sir Catraul of Catalonia. He wore strange and lavish garments and powdered his face in the style of the

Aquitanian court. Dhrun and Glyneth could barely restrain their merriment to see Shimrod bedizened in such gorgeous fashion.

Across from Shimrod sat Yane, who had darkened his skin, concealed his chin behind a black beard and his hair under a turban. He called himself Sir Hassifa from Tingitana, and spoke almost no words whatever.

When his guests were seated, Aillas rose to his feet. "Today I give welcome to my cousin, two grandees from far lands, and six gentlemen who are not only my advisers but also my friends, trusted and true! I wish to introduce you

to my son, Prince Dhrun, and to my ward, Princess Glyneth! First, from Dascinet, Lord Maloof of Maul House.”

Maloof, who was robust, of no great stature, with black curling hair and a short thick beard framing a round pale face, rose to his feet. He bowed with a flourish of the hand toward Glyneth and sat once again.

Aillas spoke: “Lord Pirmence of Castle Lutez!”

Pirmence rose and bowed: a gentleman somewhat older than Maloof, slim and handsome, with silver-gray hair, disdainfully arched eyebrows, a short

silver-gray beard, and features of fastidious distinction.

“Lord Sion-Tansifer of Porthouse Faming!”

Sion-Tansifer, oldest of the ministers, and easily the most brusque and truculent, stood stiffly erect. His field of knowledge was military strategy, in its most conservative and orthodox phases, and Aillas found his views interesting more often than useful. Sion-Tansifer was valuable for a different reason: his opinions, often couched in the form of dogmatic truism, annoyed the others and diverted their criticism from Aillas himself. Sion-Tansifer subscribed to the

chivalric ideal and on this informal occasion bowed first to Princess Glyneth, then to Prince Dhrun, allowing gallantry to over-rule the dictates of precedence.

“Lord Witherwood of Witherwood House!”

Lord Witherwood, a gentleman of middle years, was pallid and thin, with haggard cheeks, eyes of intense black and a mouth clenched as if to control great inner energies. He was passionate in his convictions and impatient with orthodoxy, a trait which endeared him not at all to either Sion-Tansifer or Maloof, the first of whom Witherwood

considered a narrow-minded martinet and the second a niggling and fussy mother hen. He acknowledged the introduction with a pair of cursory nods and subsided in his seat.

“Lord Langlark of Black Chine Castle!”

Langlark, as if gently to admonish Witherwood for his brusque behavior, rose ponderously and bowed right and left in grand style. A portly gentleman of undistinguished appearance, Langlark nevertheless contributed humour, moderation and practicality to the deliberations of the council. Aillas tended to find him the most supportive of all his ministers.

“Lord Foirry of Suanetta.”

Foirry performed a pair of polite, if perfunctory, bows. He was slight and somewhat hunched at the shoulders, and, though not so old as Maloof, he had gone bald save for a fringe of black curls. Quick movements of the head, darting brown eyes, with a lean hooking nose and a cynically curling mouth, gave him a look of minatory vigilance. Foirry's moods were mercurial, and sometimes his points of view as well, since he liked to consider an issue from every side, and tended to argue with its proponents in order to test the strength of their concepts.



“Sir Tristano is of course well known to you. Beyond sit Sir Catraul of Catalonia and Sir Hassifa of Tingitana.”

The banquet proceeded: at first sedate and guarded, with Lord Sion-Tansifer stonily silent. Lord Pirmence attempted conversation first with Sir Catraul, then Sir Hassifa, but receiving only blank looks and shrugs of incomprehension, turned his attention elsewhere.

Meanwhile Glyneth and Dhrun studied the six ministers in minute detail. They discovered that each was in some degree a specialist, with his own area of expertise. Maloof controlled the exchequer, advised in regard to the

imposition of taxes, fees, rents and imposts. Witherwood worked to codify the judicial systems of the land, reconciling regional differences and making the laws universally responsive, to persons of high and low degree alike. Sion-Tansifer, a relict from the reign of King Granice, advised as to military organization and strategy. Foirry was an expert in the field of naval architecture. Pirmence, who had traveled widely, from Ireland to Byzantium, was in effect the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while Langlark had been commissioned by Aillas to establish at Domreis a university of letters, mathematics, geography and the several sciences.

Aillas, also studying the six ministers, felt a peculiar chilly emotion compounded of mystery and awe, and even something of terror. One of the six who sat so placidly at his table, eating his food and drinking his wine, was a traitor: a creature working to his defeat and doom. Which of the six? What might be his reasons?

Aillas looked sideways to Dhrun, and felt a swelling of pride for his handsome young son. He looked to Glyneth, and felt a surge of different emotion. She sensed his attention and, turning to meet his eyes, smiled and gave her head a shake to indicate her bafflement; the mystery was beyond her understanding.

The banquet proceeded. The first course, a mince of olives, shrimp and onions baked in oyster shells with cheese and parsley was followed by a soup of tunny, cockles and winkles simmered in white wine with leeks and dill. Then, in order, came a service of broiled quail stuffed with morels, served on slices of good white bread, with side dishes of green peas; artichokes cooked in wine and butter, with a salad of garden greens; then tripes and sausages with pickled cabbage; then a noble saddle of venison glazed with cherry sauce and served with barley first simmered in broth, then fried with garlic and sage; then honeycakes, nuts and oranges; and

all the while the goblets flowed full with noble Voluspa and San Sue from Watershade, along with the tart green muscat wine of Dascinet. Despite long association the ministers were not easy with each other and, as the banquet progressed, each tended to assert his views with ever more vehemence, so that each came to seem a caricature of himself, and evidence of discord began to appear.

The most severe of the group was Sion-Tansifer, veteran of a dozen campaigns; his grizzled hair twisted and grew askew where scars marred his scalp. His statements were couched in biting, crisp accents, as if each yielded an

unassailable truth; those who disagreed earned sideglances of contempt.

Maloof, sitting opposite, tended to qualify all his opinions, so that, compared to Sion-Tansifer, he seemed somewhat vague and indecisive.

In contrast to both was Pirmence, a person suave and handsome, of grand address, easy wit and an unshakable vanity. Pirmence had traveled far and Castle Lutez was said to be a treasure-house of beautiful objects.

Langlark, plump, florid, and modest, used a tactic of half-rueful, half-perplexed self-deprecation which by

some devious means made the arguments of others seem foolish and overheated. Often he pointed out simplicities which everyone else had overlooked, and Pirmence took great care not to run afoul of Langlark, who was perhaps the single minister more subtle than himself.

Witherwood, neat and precise, attacked views which he considered illogical with vicious fervor regardless of person; Aillas had often felt the sting of his criticism, and Maloof despised him utterly. Foirry spoke little and listened to others with an air of sardonic amusement, but when aroused he could be almost as acerbic as Witherwood.

During the venison course, the conversation veered toward the South Ulfland involvement<sup>5</sup>, and few optimistic opinions were heard.

Maloof spoke in measured detachment: “It is an uncomfortable land, all rocks and moors, with here and there a bog, or a ruined hut. It may at some time yield a bare sustenance to its folk, but only if they till their soil with the same zeal they use toward killing each other. The Ulfs are a brutal people!”

“A moment!” cried Glyneth, speaking for the first time. “I was born at Throckshaw, in North Ulfland, and my parents were by no means brutal. They



were kind and good and brave, and they were killed by the Ska!”

Maloof blinked in embarrassment. “My apologies! I overspoke, of course! I should have said that the South Ulfish barons are a warlike folk, and that prosperity will come only with a cessation of their feuds and raids.”

Sion-Tansifer gave a disparaging grunt. “This on the day gold coins fall from the sky in the place of hail. The Ulfs cherish vendettas as a dog his fleas.”

Pirmence said: “Ten years ago I had occasion to visit Ys. I then traveled the overland road to Oaldes. I saw very few

folk: herdsman and crofters, and fishermen along the shore. The land is windy, open and generally empty, and here is its single advantage: it will provide holdings for all our younger sons, if King Aillas so dispenses.”

“The country is empty for good reason,” stated Foirry. “If the mountain barons released all those immured in their dungeons or stretched out on their racks, the land might even be over-populated.”

The literal-minded Maloof raised his eyebrows in consternation. “Why have we ventured into this unhappy land? We waste toil, blood and gold on warlike sorties! The Ulfs are nothing to us!”

“I am their king,” said Aillas in a mild and reasonable voice. “They are my subjects. I owe them justice and security.”

“Bah!” snapped Witherwood. “The argument fails. Suppose suddenly you were acclaimed King of Cathay; must we then send a flotilla of ships and regiments of Troice soldiers to guard their security and see to their justice?”

Aillas laughed. “Cathay is far away, South Ulfland is near at hand.”

“Nevertheless,” said Maloof stubbornly, “I feel that the proper use of your revenues is here, among your own

people!”

Sion-Tansifer issued a surly pronouncement: “I confess that I am not happy with this expedition. The rogue barons guard their glens like wolves and eagles! If we killed them all, as many more would hop from the gorse to take their places, and all would be as before.”

Langlark looked across the table with brows knitted, in his customary expression of perplexity. “Do you suggest that we abandon this wide land? Is such a surrender to our advantage? Pirmence definitely exaggerates the case; the land is not without resources,

and was once considered a rich kingdom. The mines yield tin, copper, gold and silver, and there are wide deposits of bog iron. In other times, cattle and sheep grazed the moors and the fields were planted to oats, corn and barley.”

Sion-Tansifer gave a grim chuckle. “The Ulfs can keep their ‘wide land’ and enjoy their splendid wealth, with my compliments and indeed my gratitude, if they will strike back the Ska and spill their own blood in the process. Why should we pull their chestnuts from the fire? For wealth? There is none at hand. For glory? Where the glory in chasing bog-trotters over the moors?”

“Hm ha!” Pirmence patted his silver-gray beard with a napkin. “You are mordant in your views!” He looked up the table toward Aillas. “Sir, what do you say to these carkers and pessimists?”

Aillas leaned back in his chair. “I have spoken at length on this topic; are your memories all so short? I will repeat myself. We have occupied South Ulfland in search of neither wealth nor glory nor fallow land, but for one reason only: survival.”

Sion-Tansifer gave a skeptical shake of the head. “Either I am stupid, or the concept is at flaw.”

“This is a judgment which perhaps only King Aillas will care to make,” suggested Pirmence delicately.

Aillas laughed. “Obviously Lord Sion-Tansifer’s alternatives are not exclusive.” He looked around the table. “Who else would wish to withdraw from South Ulfland? Maloof?”

“The venture is a serious drain upon the exchequer. I feel competent to say no more.”

“Pirmence?”

Pirmence pursed his lips. “We are there! Difficult if not impossible to disengage

now with honour.”

“Langlark?”

“Your arguments are compelling.”

“Witherwood?”

“I feel that we have cast our dice on a very long roll. I hope that good luck goes with us.”

“Foirry?”

“Our ships own the sea. So long as this is the case, Troicinet need not fear.”

“Sir Tristano, what is your opinion?”



Tristano hesitated a moment, then: “Let me ask this: what might be the consequences if indeed we relinquished Kaul Bocach and Tintzin Fyral and departed South Ulfland?”

Aillas said: “The hour in which we abandoned South Ulfland, King Casmir, after pinching himself to make sure that he was awake and then dancing a brief jig of sheer joy, would march his troops north on the double-quick. Later, at leisure, with all his armies at the ready, he would attack Dahaut from two directions, and in a month King Audry must flee to Aquitania or die. Casmir would then bring Cairbra an Meadhan the Table and Evandig the Throne to

Lyonesse Town, and name himself King of the Elder Isles. In the Mermeil estuary he could and would build a flotilla adequate to land his troops on Dascinet, and we would be lost. By moving into South Ulfland we have thwarted Casmir's plan, and have forced him to a more difficult program."

"You have quite convinced me," said Sir Tristano. "Lord Sion-Tansifer, what of you?"

"In all due respect, the premises are at fault. At this moment Casmir can march north up the Trompada and never set foot into South Ulfland."

“Not so,” said Aillas. “He would find himself immediately at war with us, and his logistics would be impossible. So long as we held South Ulfland and the Teach tac Teach, Casmir would never dare the Trompada. Using only local troops, we could interdict him with ease.”

Maloof spoke almost querulously: “Why all this talk of menace and hostility? Have we not ratified treaties of peace with Lyonesse? Why presume the worst case? If we show Casmir that we truly want peace, then he will reciprocate in kind, and there need be no more bluster, or clanking and clashing of weapons, which can only exacerbate the case.”

“Cast your mind back a few years,” said Aillas. “Granice was king of Troicinet. Ivar Excelsus of Dascinet thought to punish us by a war and called on Casmir for help. Casmir was only too anxious to bring his armies across the Lir, and if our ships had not smashed his armada, none of us would be dining here today at Miraldra. Has Casmir changed his spots? Obviously not.”

Maloof was not convinced. “Still, South Ulfland is not Dascinet.”

Witherwood asked him drily: “You believe, then, that if we are polite to Casmir, he will cause us no trouble?”

“We have nothing to lose,” said Maloof with dignity. “Anything is preferable to war.”

“Not anything,” said Langlark.

Aillas said: “None of us wants war, not even Casmir, who would prefer to build his triumph upon our weakness and folly. While I am king this will not be; still, I will work to keep the peace. You may be interested to learn that King Casmir and Queen Sollace are coming to Domreis for a state visit.”

“I consider that good news!” declared Maloof. “When will this be?”

“In about a month.”

Foirry gave a hoot of sardonic laughter.  
“What a farce is diplomacy!”

Aillas smiled. “As king I must be the very model of propriety, no matter how my guts roil inside me... I have said more than I chose to say.”

The banquet came to an end. Aillas and Yane, with Glyneth and Dhrun, went to sit before a fire in one of the small parlours.

Aillas asked, “So then: what is the general consensus?”

Yane looked long into the flames. “It is hard to judge. Langlark and Foirry are unlikely because of the glass-merchant episode. Sion-Tansifer is no doubt brave, if perhaps a trifle single-minded. A traitor? Unlikely. Maloof? Witherwood? Pirmence? My intuition settles upon Maloof. He is anxious for peace and so is ready to make concessions. Many such folk are known to history; Maloof might even consider himself a great hero of secret diplomacy, appeasing Casmir and so fostering some farfetched concept of goodwill.

“Then there is Pirmence. He seems flexible and might be induced to spy for gold or from sheer boredom. He is one

of that deceptively dangerous sort who, in the name of tolerance, will condone any sort of strange behavior-especially in himself.

“Witherwood? If he is a spy, his motives are hard to guess.”

## IV

AT NOON OF THE DAY after the banquet, Lord Maloof reported to King Aillas upon the condition of the royal exchequer. Maloofs demeanor was somber and he brought bad news: “By reason of the incursion into South Ulfland, together with the costs of naval construction at the Tumbling River



yards, our financial reserves have been reduced to a critical level.”

“Hmm,” said Aillas. “This does not make for good hearing.”

“I have long given warnings in this direction.” Maloof spoke with gloomy satisfaction. “Now the crows have come home to roost.”

“So it may be. ... What of our Dascinet revenues: have they arrived?”

“Not yet, sir, nor the Scola moneys. Neither are due until next week.”

“For a week, then, we must live on the

cheap. Before long, or so I hope, South Ulfland will be paying its own way. I have sent mining engineers to examine the old mines, which, so I am told, were never worked out, but simply abandoned because of bandits and robbers. Also, there may be alluvial gold in the rivers. They have never been worked and may eventually yield a large return: enough to pay all our expenses. What do you say to that?"

"So far, this flood of wealth is all hypothetical, and no doubt will require a substantial investment before we can so much as prove its existence."

Aillas grinned. "Maloof, you have a

most dampening habit of practicality! If worse comes to worst we shall rely for funds on that method known far and wide as ‘Old Infallible’: taxes! Squeeze them till their shoes squeak! Kings alone should be allowed the use of money! It is far too good for the common people.”

Maloof said sadly: “Sir, I suspect that you jest.”

“Not altogether. I intend to impose port taxes at Ys; so far they have gone unscathed. Also, we must start to collect those revenues from the Evander Valley which were formerly paid to Carfilhiot. So there is profit in sight! And sooner or later we will shake the barons loose

from the hoarded gold they have gained by robbing from each other.”

Maloof frowned at what he considered flaws in the idea, but again decided that Aillas was indulging his humour. “A formidable program!” said Maloof.

Aillas laughed. “But in practice very simple. I shall dictate laws which I know they will break; then I will fine them large sums, which they must pay or be turned out upon the moors. I only wish I could do the same for King Casmir and his illicit warship, but I fear he would not pay his fines.”

Maloof raised his eyebrows in wonder.

“You are not entitled to levy fines upon King Casmir!”

“Sadly true. Therefore I must use stronger measures.”

Again Maloof frowned in puzzlement.  
“How so?”

“Exactly two weeks from tonight a party of raiders will descend upon the shipyard at Sardilla and burn Casmir’s illicit hulk to the ground. In times to come Casmir will take his commitments more seriously.”

Maloof shook his head. “Risky business!”

“Less risky than allowing Casmir a fleet of warships.”

Maloof had no more to say and took his leave. Later in the day Aillas spoke with Lord Pirmence to whom he imparted the same information.

Still later, toward the end of the afternoon, Aillas let slip to Lord Witherwood and Lord Sion-Tansifer together that the raid at Sardilla would occur in precisely ten days.

Meanwhile, Sir Tristano assured Foirry and Langlark that the raid would take place in twenty days, even though these two were not considered prime suspects.

Early the next day Sir Tristano set off at speed to Sardilla in Caduz, that he might discover which of the three reports prompted countermeasures.

In due course Sir Tristano returned, bone-weary from hard riding and a rough passage across the Lir. Aillas and Yane heard his report with great interest. On the tenth night, no unusual precautions were put into force. On the night of the two-week interval, a hundred heavily armed warriors had lain in ambush, and through a long dismal night awaited an assault which never came. For full verification, Tristano had delayed until the twentieth night had passed, without event, and then had

returned homeward.

“Three facts are now clear,” said Aillas. “First, the ship has definitely been commissioned by Casmir. Second, a traitor sits on my Council of Ministers. Third, he is either Maloof or Pirmence.”

“Either one fits the role,” said Yane. “What now?”

“For the moment, stealth. Let us identify our man without causing him alarm.”

V

REPORTS HAD REACHED AILLAS as to rich deposits of bog-iron in South



Ulfland, not far from Oaldes, and he had requested that Maloof discover the costs involved in the construction of a foundry.

The figures, as submitted by Maloof, seemed remarkably high. Aillas considered them a moment without comment, then put the document aside. “The project clearly demands a closer scrutiny. At the moment my mind wanders; I could not sleep last night for dreaming.”

Maloof showed polite concern. “Indeed, sir! Dreams are prodromes of future truth! They provide bodes which we ignore to our risk!”

“The dreams of last night were remarkably vivid,” said Aillas. “They concerned the forthcoming visit of King Casmir. As his ship entered the harbor, I saw Casmir on the deck bare-headed, as clearly as I now see you. He turned away, and a voice spoke into my ear: ‘Watch with care! If his hat shows two plumes, blue and green in color, he proves himself friend and faithful ally! If he wears a single yellow plume, he is a treacherous enemy who must be destroyed at any cost!’ Three times the voice spoke these words! But when I turned to watch as Casmir donned his hat, I was called aside and never could see.”

“A remarkable dream!” said Maloof.

Later, Aillas recounted his remarkable dream to Pirmence: “-the voice spoke in the tones of an oracle. ‘Heed the hat which Casmir puts to his head! If it shows a silver medal in the shape of a bird, he is friend and ally! If he displays a golden lion, he signals his treachery!’ So spoke the voice, and I am in a quandary. I cannot rule a kingdom on the basis of dreams, yet I might be ignoring true portents to our general danger! What is your opinion?”

Pirmence stroked his silver-gray beard. “I am a practical man; as such I accept anything of value, whatever its source.

What sort was the hat?"

"A simple turret of crushed black velvet, lacking brim or standing crown."

"Let me suggest this: observe how closely Casmir's hat matches the hat of your dreams; then be guided by the nature of the emblem."

## VI

FROM THE TERRACE of Miraldra's north tower, Aillas and others watched the approach of the carrack *Star Regulus* from *Lyonesse*: a heavy vessel, blunt of bow and high of poop, and a brave sight with both foresail and mainsail bellied

and straining and with red and yellow banderoles streaming from the mast-heads.

The carrack entered the harbor and the crew smartly brailed up the sails. Workboats brought out lines and the Star Regulus was warped to the dock beside Miraldra, and there moored to bollards.

King Aillas now waited on the jetty, along with twenty grandees of the realm and their ladies. A gangplank was raised to the carrack's well-deck, where the stir of splendid personages could be glimpsed. A crew of liveried footmen rolled a strip of rose plush carpet across the dock from gangplank to the three

high-backed chairs of state, where King Aillas waited with Prince Dhrun at his right and Princess Glyneth to his left<sup>6</sup>.

On the deck of the Star Regulus a stately gentleman stepped forward: King Casmir. At the head of the gangway he paused and was joined by a lady of noble proportions with blonde hair coiled at her ears and netted under white pearls: Queen Sollace. Looking neither right nor left the two descended the gangway to the dock.

Aillas came forward. His gaze went to Casmir's hat: a turret of black velvet, lacking both crown and brim. A silver medal in the shape of a bird adorned the

front of the hat; a pair of plumes, blue and green, rose to the side.

Behind Queen Sollace came Prince Cassander and the Princess Madouc. Cassander, a sturdy youth of fifteen, wore a smart green cap over his brass-yellow curls. He was clearly the son of his father and had already adopted certain kingly mannerisms. His round blue eyes, as he surveyed the company, were a trifle minatory, as if to warn all against the slightest disrespect.

In contrast, the Princess Madouc, a long-legged urchin with russet curls, clearly cared nothing either for dignity or the company's approval; after a single brief

glance she dismissed them all from her consciousness, and came hopping and jumping down the gangplank like an active young kitten. She wore a long gown of orange-russet velvet tied at the waist with a black sash; her hair, approximately the colour of her gown, hung in loose ringlets. Madouc's mind was clearly as active as her conduct; her snub-nosed little face registered each trifling shift of mood with total transparency. Aillas, who well knew her antecedents, watched her with amusement. Evidently the rumors of Madouc's precocity and exuberant wilfulness had not been exaggerated.

King Casmir, as he offered his arm to



Queen Sollace at the foot of the gangplank, gave Madouc a cold glance of admonition, then turned to greet King Aillas.

A half dozen other notables of Lyonesse, in careful order of precedence, descended the gangplank with their ladies, to be announced with appropriate gusto by Miraldra's Chief Herald.

Last to leave the ship were a pair of the queen's personal attendants and, finally, the Christian priest Father Umphred, a portly figure in a plum-colored cassock.

After the formal welcomes, Casmir and Sollace were escorted to their chambers,

where they might rest and refresh themselves after the inconveniences of their voyage.

Later in the evening King Aillas sat as host at a casual supper, the full state banquet would be served on the following day. Both Aillas and Casmir dealt austerely with plate and goblet, and both rose sober from the table. They repaired to a private parlour, and, sitting before the fire, sipped a heavy golden Olorosa and discussed those matters which interested them. Neither, however, saw fit to mention the ship being built to Casmir's order in Caduz.

Casmir somewhat quizzically spoke of

the fortifications at Kaul Bocach, the gorge which contained the road between Lyonesse and South Ulfland. “Even without fortifications, twenty determined men can guard the way against an army. But I am told that now fortress frowns over fortress, that every approach is protected by traps, walls and barbicans, so that impregnability is reinforced a dozen times over. Similarly with Tintzin Fyral, where now the mountain Tac Tor is crowned with a fort as harsh as Tintzin Fyral itself. I cannot understand these feverish preparations, since we have ratified between us treaties which make such works redundant.”

“Your information is correct,” said

Aillas. "The fortifications have been augmented, and certainly they guard against invasion from Lyonesse. But is not the rationale clear? You are not immortal; imagine, if you will, that a monarch cruel, treacherous and warlike came to rule Lyonesse! Let us suppose that this monarch, for reasons beyond conjecture, decided to attack Ulfland-well then! We are prepared for him and if he is sane he will be dissuaded."

Casmir showed a wintry smile. "I grant a theoretical basis for this line of thought, but is it not, in practice, somewhat farfetched?"

"I certainly hope so," said Aillas. "May

I pour you more of this wine? It is produced on my own estate.”

“Thank you; it is very fine indeed. The wines of Troicinet are not as well known at Haidion as they should be.”

“That, of course, is a lack easy to overcome, and I shall see to it.”

Casmir thoughtfully lifted the goblet, swirled the wine and watched the golden ripples. “It is hard to recall the harsh old times when bad blood existed between our peoples.”

“All things change,” said Aillas.

“Exactly! Our treaty, signed in the heat of ruffled feelings, stipulated that Lyonesse should build no warships, on an outmoded presumption. Now that amity has returned-”

“Just so!” declared Aillas. “The present equilibrium has served us well! It is a balance which encourages peace across all the Elder Isles. This balance and this peace are vital to us and form the basis of our foreign policy.”

“Oh?” King Casmir frowned. “And how can you implement so broad a policy?”

“The principle is simple enough. We can allow neither Lyonesse nor Dahaut to

gain ascendancy over the other, because then our own security would disappear. Should King Audry attack Lyonesse and by some miracle gain advantage, then we must join the war on the side of Lyonesse until the stasis returns; and vice versa.”

Casmir managed an easy laugh and, draining his goblet, set down the empty vessel with a thump. “I wish that my own goals could be so easily defined. Alas! They depend on such ineffable considerations as justice, the redressment of old wrongs, and the thrust of history.”

Aillas poured wine into Casmir’s

goblet. "I do not envy you your maze of uncertainties. Still, you need be at no doubt in regard to Troicinet. Should either Lyonesse or Dahaut grow strong enough to menace the other, then we must throw our strength behind the weaker. In effect, you are protected by a strong navy without incurring any of the expense."

King Casmir rose to his feet. He spoke somewhat curtly. "I am tired after the voyage, and I will now bid you good evening."

Aillas, rising, said: "I hope that your rest will be comfortable."



The two went to the drawing room where Queen Sollace sat with ladies of both courts. King Casmir went only to the doorway and bowed stiffly to the occupants of the room. Queen Sollace rose to her feet, bade the company goodnight and the two were escorted to their chambers by footmen bearing flamboys.

Aillas returned along the great gallery toward his parlour. From the shadows stepped a stout person in a plum-red cassock. "King Aillas! A moment of your time, if you please!"

Aillas stopped and surveyed the rubicund face of Father Umphred, as he

now called himself. Aillas pretended no cordiality. “What do you want?”

Umphred chuckled. “I thought, first of all, to renew our old acquaintance.”

Aillas, from sheer distaste, moved back a step. Nothing daunted, Umphred spoke on. “As you may know, I have successfully brought the Holy Message to Lyonesse Town. King Casmir almost certainly will sponsor the construction of a noble cathedral, to glorify the name of God within the precincts of his happy city. If so much transpires, I may well wear the mitre.”

“This is nothing to me,” said Aillas. “In

fact, I am surprised that you dare show your face in my presence.”

With a jovial smile and a flourish of the hand, Father Umphred erased every vestige of ill-feeling which might have existed between the two. “I bring to Troicinet the joyous message of the Gospels! Pagan pomp still holds sway in Troicinet, Dascinet and South Ulfland. Nightly I pray that I may bring King Aillas and all his people into the glory of the true faith!”

“I have neither time nor inclination for such matters,” said Aillas. “My people believe or disbelieve as they see fit, and that is the way of it.” He started to turn

away, but Father Umphred put a soft white hand on his arm. “Wait!”

Aillas turned. “Well then, what now?”

Father Umphred smiled a rich and tender smile. “I pray for your personal salvation, and also that, like King Casmir, you will encourage the construction of a cathedral at Domreis the better to disseminate the Truth of God! And, if you like, to rival in splendor the cathedral at Lyonesse Town, and I might hope for the archbishopric itself!”

“I will sponsor no Christian church, in Domreis or elsewhere.”

Umphred thoughtfully pursed his lips.  
“Such are your present views but perhaps you may be induced to change them.”

“I think not.”

Again Aillas turned away, and again Father Umphred detained him. “A great pleasure to see you again, though my mind reverts with sadness to the unhappy events of our first acquaintance. To. this day King Casmir is not aware of your old identity! I am assured that you do not wish him to know; otherwise you would have informed him yourself. Am I right in this?” And Father Umphred, standing back, surveyed Aillas with kindly

interest.

Aillas reflected a moment, then said in a neutral voice: “Come with me, if you will.”

A few steps along the gallery, Aillas paused beside a uniformed footman. “Ask Sir Hassifa the Moor to join me in the small parlour.” Aillas beckoned to Umphred. “Come.”

His smile now somewhat less fulsome, Umphred followed. Aillas ushered him into the small parlour, shut the door, then went to stand by the fire, to look silently down into the flames.

Father Umphred attempted a pleasantry. “Yes indeed! Your present condition far exceeds your old! Poor little Suldrun: a sad end indeed! The world is a vale of woe, and we are sent here that we may be tested and purified for the halcyon times to come!”

Aillas made no comment. Encouraged by what he thought to be Aillas’ deep concern, Umphred continued. “My fondest hope is to lead the King of Troicinet and his noble folk into salvation, and a grand cathedral would cause the angels themselves to sing! And then, naturally, since you seem to prefer it, the facts of your old identity shall remain as secure as the secrets of the

confessional.”

Aillas darted him a single bright glance, then continued to brood into the flames.

The door opened. Yane, still in the guise of Sir Hassifa the Moor, came quietly into the parlour. Aillas straightened up and swung around. “Ah, Sir Hassifa! May I ask, are you a Christian?”

“By no means.”

“Good: a simplification. Take note of this fellow here: what do you see?”

“A priest, fat, white and sleek as a beaver, and no doubt unctuous of tongue.



He arrived today from Lyonesse.”

“Just so. I want you to examine him with care, so that you will never mistake him for any other.”

“Sir, he could pull the hood tight around his face, name himself Beelzebub and hide in the deepest catacomb of Rome and still I would know him.”

“You will find this amazing! He claims old acquaintance with me.”

Sir Hassifa turned to examine Umphred with wonder. “What could be his motives?”

“He wants me to build him a fine church at Domreis. If I refuse, he threatens to betray my identity to King Casmir.”

Sir Hassifa inspected Umphred anew. “Is he addled? King Casmir already knows your identity. You are Aillas of Troicinet.”

Umphred began to dislike the tone of the conversation. He licked his lips. “Yes, yes, of course. I merely ventured a pleasantry, as might pass between old friends!”

Aillas spoke to Sir Hassifa: “He persists in his claim! I am becoming annoyed. If he were not here as a guest, I might well

clap him into a dungeon. I may do so in any case.”

“Do not soil your hospitality on his account!” Sir Hassifa advised. “Wait until he returns to Lyonesse. I can have his throat cut at any hour of day or night, with a sharp or dull knife.”

Aillas said: “It might be best to drag him before Casmir at this very moment and hear what he has to say. Then, if he utters some malicious tale-”

“Wait!” cried Umphred desperately. “I now understand my error! I was mistaken, in whole and in part! I have never seen you before in my life!”

Sir Hassifa said: "I fear that he might yet blurt out some tumble of dirty nonsense, to the detriment of your dignity." He produced a gleaming dagger. "Let me cut out his tongue, at least. We will cauterize the wound with a hot poker."

"No, no!" cried Umphred, now sweating. "I will say nothing to anyone! My lips are sealed! I know a thousand secrets; all are immured forever!"

Aillas said to Yane: "Since he is a guest, I can take the matter no farther. But if ever a rumor or hint of his folly be heard--"

"No need to threaten!" declared

Umphred. "I have made a sad mistake, which will never be repeated!"

"That is good news," said Aillas.

"Especially for you. Remember that the person for whom you mistook me has reason to take a savage revenge upon you."

"The episode is forgotten," said Umphred. "Pray excuse me now; I am fatigued and I still have my devotions to perform."

"Go."

## VII

FROM MIRALDRA'S MAIN GALLERY a portal opened into the great hall. To either side of the opening stood a heroic marble statue, the pair brought from the Mediterranean five centuries before. The statues represented warriors of ancient Hellas, naked save for helmets, with short swords and shields held in attitudes of attack.

King Casmir and Queen Sollace, after taking breakfast in their chambers, strolled along the gallery, pausing now and again to examine those objects of craft and virtue which across the years had been collected by the kings of Troicinet.

Beside one of the marble statues stood a footman in the livery of Miraldra, armed with a ceremonial halberd. As King Casmir and Queen Sollace paused to examine the heroic figures, the footman made a signal to King Casmir, who, turning his head, recognized that person whom he knew as “Valdez”.

King Casmir looked up and down the gallery, then stepped apart from Queen Sollace and approached the footman.

“So this is your vantage-point!” he muttered. “I have often wondered!”

“You would not see me here today, had I not wished to speak with you. I will no longer be coming to Lyonesse Town; my

movements are attracting notice among the fishermen.”

“Oh?” King Casmir’s voice was flat.

“What will you do now?”

“I intend a quiet life in the country.”

King Casmir, pretending interest in the statue, reflected a moment. “You must come to Lyonesse Town one last time, that I may reward you properly for your service. Perhaps we might arrange a new system, from which you would derive profit but know no risk.”

“I think not,” said Valdez drily. “Still, if someone speaks my name at Haidion,



give him attention; he will bring news...  
. Someone approaches.”

King Casmir turned away, and with  
Queen Sollace strolled down the gallery.

After a moment Sollace asked: “Why do  
you frown so?”

King Casmir forced a laugh. “Perhaps I  
envy King Aillas his fine statues! We  
must see to something similar at  
Haidion.”

“I would rather have a set of authentic  
relics for my church,” mused Queen  
Sollace.

King Casmir, lost in thought, spoke absentmindedly: “Yes, yes, my dear; so it shall be, just as you wish.”

Events, in fact, were not going to King Casmir’s satisfaction. When spies left his employ, he liked to terminate the relationship in a definite manner, so that they might never sell their services elsewhere, and perhaps apply what they had learned to his detriment... . Slowly he became aware of Queen Sollace’s voice: “-so Father Umphred assures me, is to buy before the need is recognized. He knows of three authentic splinters from the Holy Cross that we could acquire at this moment for a hundred crowns apiece. The Holy Grail itself is

known to be somewhere about the Elder Isles, and Father Umphred has had the opportunity to buy maps providing exact-”

Casmir demanded: “Woman, what are you talking about?”

“The relics for the cathedral, of course!”

“How can you talk of relics when the cathedral itself is no more than a hallucination?”

Queen Sollace spoke with dignity.

“Father Umphred declares that in time the Holy Lord will surely bring you to grace.”

“Ha. If the Holy Lord wants a cathedral so badly, let him build it himself.”

“I shall so pray!”

Half an hour later King Casmir and Queen Sollace again passed by the statues, but now Valdez was nowhere to be seen.

# Chapter 4

## I

THE STAR REGULUS EASED AWAY from the jetty and with yards braced hard on the port tack, gathered way and departed Miraldra. King Casmir climbed to the poop deck and went to stand by the taff-rail. He raised his arm high toward the notables on the dock; his expression, placid and benign, indicated only satisfaction with his visit.

The carrack, leaving the harbour, rose and fell to long swells from the west. Casmir descended the companionway

and retired to the main saloon. He settled into the great chair and, gazing out the stern casements, mulled over the events of the past few days.

Apparently, and for all to see, the visit had gone exactly to the precepts of courtly etiquette. Still, despite the exchange of public compliments, antipathy hung dark and heavy between the two kings.

The scope of this mutual dislike puzzled King Casmir: where was its source? Casmir's memory for faces was exact; almost certainly he had known King Aillas in other less amiable circumstances. Long years before,

Granice, then King of Troicinet, had visited Haidion at Lyonesse Town. His company had included Aillas, then an obscure little princeling not even reckoned in the line of royal succession. Casmir had barely noticed him. Could this child have created so mordant an impression? Most unlikely; Casmir, a practical man, wasted no emotion on trivial causes.

The mystery weighed on Casmir's mind, especially since he felt that somewhere a significant portent awaited his knowing. Aillas' face slipped in and out of mental focus, always pinched into an expression of cold hatred. The background remained indistinct. A dream? A magic

spell? Or simple discord between the rulers of competing states?

The problem chafed at Casmir's nerves until finally he thrust it aside. Still he gained no peace of mind. Everywhere obstacles worked to thwart his ambition... . Ultimately, so Casmir told himself, these barriers must break apart if only before the sheer brutal force of his will, but meanwhile they carked at his patience and troubled the ease of his existence.

As King Casmir sat drumming his fingers along the arms of the chair and reflecting upon the circumstances of his life, a quandary five years old surfaced



into his mind. This was the augury spoken by Persilian the Magic Mirror, on his own initiative: an occasion unique in itself. Persilian, without prompting of any sort, had called out a rasping, chanting fragment of doggerel. Casmir remembered only the gist of the words, something like: “Casmir, Casmir! Your daughter is Suldrun the Fair, and she is fey! Her first-born son before his death shall sit properly at Cairbra an Meadhan, nor shall you sit there nor on Evandig before him!”<sup>7</sup>

Casmir had uttered a poignant question: “But shall I sit at these places afterwards?”

Persilian spoke no more. The mirror, with almost palpable malice, reflected only Casmir's face, distorted and congested with annoyance.

Casmir had pondered the augury at length, especially when Suldrun died after yielding a single child to the royal household: the unpredictable and less than tractable Princess Madouc.

The Star Regulus arrived at Lyonesse Town. King Casmir and the royal family, disembarking, stepped into a white double-sprung carriage drawn by four unicorns with gilded horns. Father Umphred thought to jump nimbly into the carriage, but was deterred by King

Casmir's wordless glare. Smiling a bland smile, Umphred hopped back to the ground.

The carriage rolled up the Sfer Arct to the portals of Haidion, where the palace staff waited in ranks of formal welcome. King Casmir gave them perfunctory nods and, entering the palace, repaired to his chambers and immediately immersed himself in the business of his kingdom.

Two days later Casmir was approached by Doutain, his chief falconer. Doutain tendered a small capsule. "My lord, a pigeon in lading has returned to the west cote."

King Casmir, instantly interested, said:  
“Reward the little creature well, with  
corn and millet!”

Doutain replied: “It has already been  
done, your Majesty, and done well!”

“Good work, Doutain,” murmured King  
Casmir, his attention already fixed upon  
the message. He unfolded the wisp of  
paper and read:

Your Highness:

To my sorrow I have been posted to  
South Ufjland, to service of a most  
dreary and objectionable, sort. I can no  
longer maintain communication,

certainly not in the immediate, future..

The message was signed with a code symbol. “Hmf,” said Casmir, and tossed the message into the fire. Later in the day Doutain appeared once again. “A pigeon has come down to the east cote, my lord.”

“Thank you, Doutain.” The message, signed with a different symbol, read:

Your Highness:

For reasons beyond understanding I have been despatched to South Ulfland, where my duties are unlikely to accord either with my disposition or my inclination.

This must, therefore, far the nonce, be my last communication.

“Bah!” said King Casmir, and cast the message into the flames. He threw himself down into his chair, and tugged at his beard. The two messages: coincidence? Unlikely, though not impossible. Might Valdez have betrayed the two? But Valdez had been denied knowledge of their names.

Still, it was interesting that Valdez had retired at this particular juncture. If he could be induced to return to Lyonesse, the truth might well be ascertained.

Casmir grunted. Valdez was far too sly a

fox to risk such a visit; though the sheer fact of his visit would almost certainly prove his faith.

## II

QUEEN SOLLACE HAD LONG BEEN CONVERTED to Christianity and Father Umphred saw to it that her fervor remained fresh. Of late she had become beguiled by the concept of sanctity; twenty times a day she murmured to herself: "Holy Saint Sollace of Lyonesse!" And: "How fine it sounds! The Cathedral of the Blessed Saint Sollace!"

Father Umphred, whose ambitions had

never precluded the bishop's mitre, nor would he have scorned an archbishopric over all the Lyonesse Diocese, encouraged Sollace in her hopes for beatitude. "Dear queen, indeed! Of the seven holy acts, a noble house of prayer where none before existed affords our Lord God the most exalted refinement of bliss, and his joy consecrates those responsible! Ah, what glory gleams across the future! What singing in the choirs of heaven as they contemplate the cathedral soon to grace Lyonesse Town!"

"I will so dedicate myself in every phase of my being!" declared Sollace. "Might we truly name this cathedral with



my name?”

“That decision must be affirmed by higher authority, but my influence carries weight! When the bells ring loud across the land and paternosters enrich the air, and King Casmir himself kneels before the altar to receive my benediction, who would deny the style ‘Sanctissima’ to your name?”

“‘Sollace Sanctissima!’ Yes! That is good! On this very day I will again bring our business to the attention of the king!”

“What a victory when Casmir accepts the Gospel and comes to Jesus! The whole kingdom must then follow his

lead!”

Sollace pursed her lips. “We shall see, but let us try one victory at a time. If I am truly sanctified, the world will rejoice at the news, and his Majesty will be impressed!”

“Precisely so! One step must follow on another!”

During the evening, while Casmir stood with his back to the fire, Sollace entered the chamber. Father Umphred came behind but modestly slipped aside to stand in the shadows.

Queen Sollace, aglow with hope, swept

across the chamber and after exchanging civilities with the king, broached her concept of the noble cathedral, with towers on high and bells tolling the message of salvation far across the countryside. In her fervor she neglected to notice the narrowing of Casmir's round blue eyes and the constriction of his mouth. She described grandeur on a scale to amaze all Christendom: an edifice so majestic and rich that Lyonesse Town must surely become a destination of pilgrimage.

King Casmir, hearing nothing to please him, at last spoke out: "What kind of wild talk is this? Has that fat priest been spewing nonsense again? I always know

when you have seen him; he brings to your face something of his own look, which is that of a dying sheep!”

Queen Sollace cried out indignantly: “My lord, you mistake the transports of holy rapture for the facial expression you so unkindly describe!”

“No matter! He connives and lurks with crafty skill; I find him loitering wherever I look; indeed, I am much of a mind to send him packing.”

“Sir, reflect on this! The Cathedral of Saint Sollace would bear my name!”

“Woman, have mercy! Can you imagine

the cost of such an edifice? Enough to bankrupt the kingdom, while the priest trots here and there, smirking as he thinks how he has befuddled the King and Queen of Lyonesse!”

“Not so, my lord! Father Umphred is known and respected in Rome itself! His single goal is the advancement of Christendom!”

Casmir turned to kick the fire into a more active blaze. “I have heard of these cathedrals: treasure-houses of gold and jewels wrung from the folk of the land, who then cannot pay their taxes to the king.”

Queen Sollace said wistfully: “Our land is wealthy! It could support such a fine cathedral.”

Casmir chuckled. “Tell the priest to bring me gold from Rome, some of which I will spend on a fine church.”

Sollace said with dignity: “Good night, my lord. I am retiring to my chambers.”

King Casmir bowed and turned back to the fire, and so failed to notice the departure of Father Umphred from the room.

### III

KING CASMIR'S FIRST URGENCY was to repair the damage done to his intelligence network. One afternoon he went to a chamber in the old wing of Haidion, in the squat Tower of Owls above the armoury. This room, furnished sparsely, had much experience of harsh judgments and quick justice.

King Casmir, seating himself at the bare wooden table, poured wine from a white beechwood flagon into a white beechwood cup, and waited in stony calm.

Minutes passed. King Casmir showed no impatience.

In the corridor sounded a shuffle of feet and muttering voices. Oldebor, a functionary of no definite title<sup>8</sup>, looked through the door. “Your Majesty, will you see the prisoner?”

“Bring him in.”

Oldebor stepped forward into the room and gestured over his shoulder. Two jailers, in black leather aprons and conical leather hats, jerked on a chain and brought their prisoner stumbling into the room: a tall spare man in his early maturity, wearing a soiled shirt and ragged pantaloons. Despite his disheveled condition, the captive showed a notably good address; his



posture, indeed, seemed incongruously easy, under the circumstances, and even a trifle contemptuous. In person, he was broad of shoulder, narrow at the hip, with long strong legs and the hands of an aristocrat. His hair, matted and dirty, was a thick black thatch; his eyes were clear hazel under a low forehead. Wide cheekbones converged to a narrow jaw; a high-bridged nose hooked over a bony chin. His skin, dark sallow-olive, seemed to show a curious plum-colored undertone, as if from the close flow of rich dark blood.

One of the jailers, annoyed by the captive's composure, jerked again at the chain. "Show proper respect! You stand

in the presence of the king!”

The captive nodded toward King Casmir. “Good day to you, sir.”

King Casmir responded in an even voice: “Good day to you, Torqual. How have you found your confinement?”

“Tolerable only, sir, and not for the fastidious.”

Another person came quietly into the room: a gentleman somewhat past his first youth, stocky, brisk as a robin, with good features, neat brown hair and clever brown eyes. He bowed. “Good day, my lord.”

“Good day, Shalles. Do you know Torqual?”

Shalles inspected the prisoner. “To this moment, I have had no contact with the gentleman.”

“That is to our general advantage,” said King Casmir. “You will therefore have no prejudicial emotions in his direction. Jailers, remove the chains so that Torqual may sit in comfort; then you may wait in the corridor. Oldebor, you may wait outside as well.”

Oldebor protested. “Your Majesty, this is a desperate man, with neither hopes nor qualms!”

King Casmir showed a faint chilly smile. “That is why he is here. Abide in the corridor. Shalles is well able to protect me.”

While Shalles turned the prisoner a dubious sideglance, the jailers removed the chains, then, with Oldebor, withdrew to the corridor.

King Casmir pointed to benches. “Gentlemen, be seated. May I offer you wine?”

Both Torqual and Shalles accepted cups of wine, and seated themselves.

Casmir looked back and forth between

the two, then said: “You are men of different sorts; so much is clear. Shalles is the fourth son of the honourable knight Sir Pellent-Overtree, whose estate includes three farms of sixty-three acres in total. Shalles has learned the niceties of noble behavior together with a taste for good food and wine, but so far has found no means to indulge his yearnings. Torqual, of you I know little, but I would learn more. Perhaps you will tell us something of yourself.”

“With pleasure,” said Torqual. “To begin with, I am the member of a class which may well include a single individual: myself. My father is a duke of Skaghahe; my lineage is longer than

the history of the Elder Isles. My tastes, like those of Sir Shalles, are nice; I prefer the best of everything. While I am a Ska, I care not a fig for the Ska mystique. I have cohabited freely and often with Underfolk women and bred a dozen hybrids; therefore they call me a renegade.

“The epithet is inaccurate and undeserved. I cannot be faithless to a cause which I never have endorsed. Indeed, I am absolutely faithful to the only cause I espouse, which is my own welfare. I take pride in this unswerving loyalty!

“I came away from Skaghane early, with

several advantages: the strength, vigor and intelligence of the typical Ska, which was my birthright, and the expert use of weapons, for which I must take credit upon myself, since there are few, if any, who can excel me, especially with the sword.

“In order to maintain a gentlemanly style, and lacking sympathy for working up the Ska hierarchies, I became a brigand; I robbed and murdered with the best. However, there is little wealth to be had in the Ulflands, and so I came to Lyonesse.

“My plans were simple and innocent. As soon as I took enough gold and silver to

fill a wagon, I intended to become a robber baron of the Teach tac Teach, and live out my life in relative seclusion.

“Through a freak of luck, I was trapped by your thief-takers. I now await drawing and quartering, though I will be glad to consider any other program your Majesty may see fit to propose.”

“Hm,” said King Casmir. “Your execution is scheduled for tomorrow?”

“That is my understanding.”

Casmir nodded and turned to Shalles.

“What do you think of this fellow?”



Shalles considered Torqual sidelong. “Obviously, he is a blackguard of the deepest dye, with the conscience of a shark. At this moment he has nothing to lose and so feels free to exercise his insouciance.”

“What faith would you put in his word?”

Shalles dubiously cocked his head to the side. “It would depend upon how far his self-esteem rides with his faith. I am sure the word ‘honour’ means something different to him than it does to me or to you. I would trust him better on a system of rewards after stipulated service. Still, if only from caprice, Torqual might serve you well. He is clearly intelligent,

energetic, forthright, and despite his present condition, I would guess him to be resourceful.”

King Casmir turned to Torqual. “You have heard Shalles’ opinions. What is your comment?”

“He is a person of discernment. I cannot argue with his remarks.”

King Casmir nodded, and poured wine into the three mugs. “The circumstances are these. King Aillas of Troicinet has extended his power into South Ulfland, where it impedes my own ambitions. I therefore wish to make South Ulfland ungovernable for the Troice. I intend that

you two should serve me to this end, both singly, or, when occasion arises, in tandem. Shalles, what do you say to this?”

Shalles considered. “Your Majesty, may I be frank?”

“Naturally.”

“The task is dangerous. I am willing to serve you in this regard, at least for a limited period, if the rewards are commensurate to the danger.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Full knighthood and a prosperous estate

of at least two hundred acres.”

King Casmir grunted. “You value yourself highly.”

“Sir, my life, drab and insipid though it may seem to others, is the only life given me to live.”

“Very well; so it shall be. Torqual, what of you?”

Torqual laughed. “I accept, regardless of risk or your distrust, or whatever the nature of the task, or whatever the reward.”

King Casmir said dryly: “Essentially, I

want you to establish yourself in the highlands of South Ulfland and there wreak as much disorder as possible, but only upon the forces cooperating with the Troice. You are to make contact with other high-country barons and counsel disobedience, insurrection and banditry similar to your own. Do you understand my needs?”

“Perfectly! I accept your proposal with enthusiasm.”

“I thought as much. Shalles, you shall, like Torqual, visit among such of the barons you suspect of disaffection, and give them counsel and coordinate their efforts. If necessary, you may offer

bribes, though this will be your last resort. You will also work closely with Torqual, and at intervals you will report to me, by methods which we will arrange.”

“Sir, I will do my best in this regard, for a period which perhaps we now should define for our exact understanding.”

Casmir drummed a quick tattoo on the table-top, but when he spoke, his voice was even. “Much depends upon circumstances.”

“Exactly so, sir, which is why I wish to define an upper limit upon my service. The danger is very great in this game

which you want me to play. In short, I do not care to roam the moors until finally I am killed.”

“Hm. How long a term do you suggest?”

“In view of the danger, a year seems long enough.”

Casmir grunted. “In a year you will hardly learn the lay of the land.”

“Sir, I can only do my best, and, remember, King Aillas will send out his own spies. Once I am identified, my usefulness decreases.”

“Hmf. I will think on it. Come before me

tomorrow afternoon.”

Shalles rose to his feet, bowed and departed. Casmir turned to Torqual.

“Shalles may be somewhat too scrupulous for this sort of work. Still, he is avaricious, which is a good sign. As for you, I am under no illusions. You are a wolf’s-head, a crafty murderer and a blackguard.”

Torqual grinned. “I also ravish women. Usually they cry and hold out their arms when I leave them.”

King Casmir, who was something of a prig in such matters, turned him a cold stare. “I will provide you weapons and,



at your option, a small company of cutthroats. If you succeed well, and, like Shalles, desire a life of rustic gentility, I will also find for you a suitable estate. So I hope to guarantee your faith. You have reason to serve me well.”

Torqual smiled. “Why not? As scoundrels go, we are a pair.”

The remark, in King Casmir’s view, verged close upon insolence, and he gave Torqual another cold stare. “I will confer with you again in two days. Meanwhile, you will continue to be my guest.”

“I would prefer Haidion to the

Peinhador.”

“No doubt. Oldebor!”

Oldebor entered from the corridor.

“Your Majesty?”

“Take Torqual back to the Peinhador. Let him bathe, provide him decent garments, house him in a clean cell and give him food to his choice-within reason, of course.”

The jailers came into the room. “Are we not to see the colour of his guts? He is the worst of the worst!”

“And a Ska, to boot!” declared the other.

“I hoped to work the knife myself!”

“Another time,” said King Casmir.

“Torqual has been assigned to dangerous work in the service of the state.”

“Very well, your Majesty. Come along, dog-dirt.”

Torqual fixed the jailer with a cool stare. “Jailer, take care! I am soon to be free and in the king’s service. On a whim I might seek you out; then we shall see who does good work with the knife!”

King Casmir made an impatient gesture. “Enough of this!” He looked to the

jailers, now subdued and uneasy: “You have heard Torqual’s remarks; if I were you, I would henceforth use him with courtesy.”

“Sire, it shall be as you command. Torqual, come; we spoke in jest. Tonight you shall drink wine and eat roast fowl.”

King Casmir smiled his wintry smile. “Oldebor, in two days I will again see Torqual.”

# Chapter 5

## I

THREE DAYS AFTER THE DEPARTURE of King Casmir and his retinue aboard the carrack *Star Regulus*, Aillas himself set sail for South Ulfland with a flotilla of seventeen ships.

The company included Lord Maloof and Lord Pirmence, both seething with resentment. Dhrun and Glyneith remained at Domreis, to be educated in a style befitting their rank. Both would learn Latin and Greek, geography, the natural sciences, calligraphy, the mathematics of

Pythagoras, Euclid and Aristarchus, as well as the new style of Moorish numeration. Through readings in Herodotus, Tacitus, Xenophon, Clavetz of Avallon, Dioscuros of Alexandria, the Chronicles of Ys, and Khersom's War of the Goths and the Huns, they would gain an overview of history. They would learn to name stars, planets and constellations, and ponder a variety of cosmological theories. Dhrun would attend a school of military science, where he would learn the skill of weapons, and the strategies of warfare. Glyneith and Dhrun both would attend classes in the courtly arts, which included dancing, declamation, music and the proprieties.

Both Glyneth and Dhrun, had their preferences been heeded, would have accompanied Aillas to South Ulfland. Not so with Lords Maloof and Pirmence, each of whom had advanced a dozen reasons why he should not be plucked so rudely from his familiar routines.

To Maloof's protests Aillas made the response: "I appreciate your concern for the work which will be interrupted, but your talents are more urgently needed in South Ulfland; this is where you may best serve king and country."

"My skills are complex and sophisticated," grumbled Maloof. "Any

clerk can weigh up broad-beans and count out onions.”

“You still do not understand the scope of our project! I will want an inventory of every estate in the land, so that we know its extent and resources, and-no less important-the acreage unoccupied, unclaimed, wild or in dispute. You will direct a staff of surveyors, cartographers and clerks to research the existing records.”

Lord Maloof stood limp. “That is a monumental task!”

“Naturally the work will not be accomplished in a day, but it is only the



beginning. I will expect you to establish and regulate an exchequer for South Ulfland. Third-”

” “Third’?” groaned Maloof. “Already you have laid out a whole lifetime of work! Your confidence in me is flattering but unreal; I can work only by day and by night: no other periods of time exist. Meanwhile my work here at Domreis will be muddled by bunglers and hacks!”

“Here, so I suppose, you refer to your work with the exchequer?”

Lord Maloof flushed and looked askance toward Aillas. “Naturally: just so!”

“I have made inquiries and I am assured that we leave the work, and again I refer to the exchequer, in capable hands. It is time for a change! A clever man such as yourself needs challenge to develop his full potential, and also to keep him out of mischief. South Ulfland with its intransigent barons and threatening Ska offers a hundred such challenges!”

“But I know nothing, and want to know nothing, of troubles and conflicts and war! I am a man of peace!”

“And I no less! But even men of peace must learn to fight. The world is often brutal, and not everyone shares our ideals. Therefore, you must be prepared

to defend yourself and your loved ones, or reconcile yourself to slavery.”

“I prefer to reason, to proffer kind counsel, to ameliorate and to compromise!”

“As a preliminary and tentative policy, these activities are useful!” said Aillas.

“If we behave reasonably, our conscience is clear! Then, should decency fail and the tyrants attack, we can lop off their heads with righteous zest.”

“I have few skills along these lines,” said Maloof in a bleak voice.

“Now then, Maloof: do not underestimate yourself! You are sturdy and deft, if a trifle overweight. After a few brisk campaigns, you will gallop your horse and brandish your battle-axe with as much fury as any!”

“Bah!” grumbled Maloof. “I am not the hell-for-leather bravo you take me for. I will waste my life in this dour wilderness.”

“Never! You may use well this life of yours in South Ulfland, but we will find scope for all your skills: perhaps in the suppression of espionage. You might-or might not-be startled to learn that I have discovered treachery in the most exalted

circles!”

Maloof blinked and responded, in a subdued voice: “Your Majesty, it shall be as you command.”

Lord Pirmence used different tactics when it came his turn. “Your Majesty, I deem this appointment in the nature of an accolade! I shall always cherish this evidence of your high esteem! But I am a modest man, and I must resolutely decline the honour. No, sir! Do not press it upon me! My withdrawal is definite and irrevocable! I have gained distinction enough for a single lifetime; let the eager young bloods take their turn!” Lord Pirmence performed a

courtly bow, and would have considered the matter closed had not Aillas called him back.

“Lord Pirmence, your abnegation does you credit. However, I assure you that honour sufficient for all will be won on the moors of South Ulfland!”

“That is good to hear!” declared Lord Pirmence. “But alas! You forget my advancing years! I have enemies, yes: pangs and aches, failing vision, asthma, toothlessness and senile cachexis; but they are no longer cruel knights, ogres, Goths and Moors. I intimately know the ague, gout, rheumatism and palsy. If truth be known, I am almost ready to creep

away to Castle Lutez, to wrap myself in eiderdowns and quiet my roaring digestion with a diet of curds and gruel.”

Aillas said soberly: “Lord Pirmence, I am greatly distressed to hear of your decrepitude.”

“Alas! It is an end to which we all must come!”

“So I am led to believe. Incidentally, are you aware that a person who bears a striking resemblance to yourself roams the coarser districts of Domreis? No? He does your reputation no credit! Recently, close on midnight, I happened to look into the Green Star Inn and there

I saw this person with one foot on a bench, the other on a table, brandishing high a tankard of ale and trolling a mighty stave; meanwhile he clasped one of the tavern wenches with an iron grip. His whiskers were exactly like your own and he seemed to enjoy almost an excess of exuberant good health.”

“How I envy the man!” murmured Lord Pirmence. “I wonder at his secret!”

“Perhaps you will learn it in South Ulfland. I consider your presence indispensable. After all, when one hunts important game, he calls out the old hound. I rely upon you to impose order upon the barons of the moors.”



Lord Pirmence gave a delicate cough. “I would survive not a single windy day on those desolate fells!”

“To the contrary! You will thrive in the fresh climate! ‘An Ulf lives forever-unless he is cut with steel, or chokes on his meat, or falls drunk into the mire!’ So say the Ulfs. You will soon be as hearty as ever!”

Lord Pirmence shook his head. “Truly, I am not your man! I have little tact with boors and bog-trotters. With the best will in the world I will surely do our cause a disservice.”

“Odd,” mused Aillas. “I was told that

you have recently become expert in the field of secret diplomacy!”

Lord Pirmence pursed his lips, pulled at his mustache, and looked toward the ceiling. “Hum, ha! Not quite true! Still—when duty calls I must ignore all else and leap into the breach.”

“That is the response I expected from you,” said Aillas.

An hour before the flotilla’s departure, Aillas came down to the jetty to find Shimrod lounging against a stack of bales. Aillas stopped short. “What are you doing here?”

“I have been waiting for you to appear.”

“Why did you not show yourself in Miraldra? I sail on the tide for South Ulfland!”

“No difficulty there. I will accompany you, if I may.”

“Aboard the ship? To Ys?”

“That is my hope.”

“Naturally you may come.” Aillas scrutinized Shimrod keenly. “I sense a mystery here. Why your sudden yearning for the hinterlands?”

“The city Ys? Hardly a hinterland.”

“I see that you plan to tell me nothing of consequence.”

“There is nothing to tell. I have a few items of business at a place not far from Ys, and during the voyage I shall enjoy myself in your company.”

“Come aboard, then. But you must be prepared to sleep in the bilge.”

“Any little cranny, such as the captain’s saloon, will suit me well.”

“I am happy to find you so flexible. Let

us see what we can do.”

## II

PROPELLED BY FAIR WINDS and riding sunny blue seas, the ships from Troicinet made a pleasant voyage along the Lir. On the second day they rounded Cape Farewell, then discovered three days of calms and fickle winds, while only a mile to the east rose the tall Cliffs of Kegan, bearded with white foam.

Mile by mile the flotilla made its northing until finally the shape of Cape Kellas appeared on the horizon.

Rounding the cape, past the colonnaded

Temple of Atlante, the fleet entered the estuary of the Evander and dropped anchor beside the docks of the city Ys.

One by one the ships approached the docks, discharged troops and cargo, took aboard fresh water and contingents on their way home, and put out to sea again.

Aillas, conferring with his commanders, heard both good and bad news. His strictures against raids, pillaging and the prosecution of feuds had, for the most part, been heeded. Some of the barons wholeheartedly endorsed the call for public order; others seemed to be watching and waiting before committing acts which could bring them to ruin:

each, in effect, waiting for someone to test the mettle of the new king. This peace, no matter how fragile and tentative, was good news.

On the other hand, the barons had not fulfilled the total scope of Aillas' commands. Few, if any, had disbanded their companies of armed retainers that they might return to more productive work, in field, quarry and forest, and so bring some small measure of prosperity to the land.

Aillas immediately sent messengers to every castle, fortress and mountain keep, requiring that the barons, or knights, or earls, however they styled themselves,

should meet with him at Stronson, the castle of Sir Helwig, high in the heart of the moors.

Aillas rode to the meeting in company with Sir Tristano, Lord Maloof, who was glum, and Lord Pirmence, who showed an airy detachment, together with an escort of thirty knights and a hundred men-at-arms. The day of the meeting was blessed with fine warm weather; the moors smelled fresh of heather, gorse and fern, with the elemental reek of the dank turf rising heavy below.

The company, assembled on the meadow to the side of Stronson Castle, made a



fine spectacle, with metal gleaming and colours ablaze in the sunlight. The barons for the most part wore mail shirts and metal caps; their jupons, capes and trousers were of rich colour and fine fabric, and many wore sleeveless aprons embroidered with personal emblems or the arms of their houses. Almost all had brought heralds who held high gonfalons displaying the baronial arms.

Thirty-six of the forty-five barons commanded to the conclave were on hand. Sir Helwig called out a summons and those present came to sit at a semi-circular table, each with his herald and gonfalon at his back. To one side Aillas' escort rested at ease. Not so those

retainers and clansmen who had come to Stronson in company with the barons; they stood in knots and groups, with those parties at feud darting lambent glances toward each other.

For several minutes Aillas considered the thirty-six more or less amicable faces. Privately he felt the turn-out to be satisfactory, but to ignore the nine cases of contumacy would instantly make a mockery of his authority. Here, in fact, was his test, and the barons watched him with curiosity as he stood to the side with Tristano and Sir Helwig's herald, conning the list of those not on hand.

Aillas went to confront the company;

standing clean-shaven and crisply handsome before the grizzled and hard-bitten barons of the moors, he seemed almost ludicrously inexperienced and untried; certain of the barons took no pains to conceal their opinions.

Amused rather than nettled, Aillas spoke a polite greeting and expressed his pleasure for the fine weather which favored the occasion. He took up his list and called out the names of the missing nine barons. Receiving no response, he turned to Sir Tristano: "Despatch a knight with five soldiers to the homes of each of these truants. Let the knights express my displeasure. Let them announce to each that since he would not

meet me here at Stronson, or send a message of courteous explanation, he is therefore commanded to my camp at Ys. Let each understand with the utmost clarity that if he fails to appear within the week, he shall be disenfranchised from his lands and reduced to the rank of commoner, and all his property shall immediately revert to the king. These truants must also be told that their punishment, should they fail to appear, will be my first order of business, and that, one by one, I will strike them low. Let the knights and their escorts depart at once.”

Aillas turned back to the now grimly attentive barons. “Gentlemen, as you

have heard before, the Kingdom of South Ulfland is no longer a land of lawlessness. My remarks today will be brief but most important. First: I command that each of you dissolve his company of armed soldiery, that these men, so released, may devote their efforts either to tilling the soil and enriching the land, or enlisting in the King's Army. You may retain your household servants, gardeners and stablemen; but you will no longer need garrisons nor an armed guard.

“Through these economies and the increase of your rents you will yourself prosper, even after paying into the exchequer those taxes which Lord

Maloof will presently fix upon you. These monies will not be spent upon vanity or proud display, but will go to improve the land. I intend to re-open the old mines, forge iron and in due course build ships. Everywhere in South Ulfland are the ruins of old villages; each is a stark sight, and each shall be rebuilt or replaced to house the population. In this new prosperity you all must certainly share.

“So that an Ulf army may protect Ulfland, and so that the soldiers you see here may return to Troicinet, I now announce that Lord Pirmence will recruit a force of strong and able men. For your younger sons and landless brothers the

army will offer means to advancement, with promotion and rewards based upon merit rather than birth. The men-at-arms released from your personal services may also find careers in the Ulfish Army.

“Initially I intend a force of a thousand men. They will be trained until they are equal or superior to any other troops in the world, including the Ska. They will wear proper uniforms, eat good food, and will be paid in accordance with the schedule of the Troice army. At the end of their service they will be granted a freehold acreage of arable land.

“These first thousand troops will

become an elite cadre, and assist in the training of future recruits. They will learn a strict discipline and they will learn to defeat the Ska, who until now have marched through South Ulfland as they chose, looting and taking slaves. Those days are now in the past.

“I have said all I wish to say. You must abide by the new law of the land or face the consequences. If you wish to ask questions of me, or bring important matters to my attention, here I sit, and I will be pleased to listen and respond as well as I can. For those who thirst, I notice that a cask of ale has been broached.”



The barons rose somewhat uncertainly to their feet and looked around the area. Presently they separated into small knots and groups. One of the barons, a person close to middle-age, tall and massive, with a great bush of black beard, approached Aillas and stared at him intently. "Lord King, do you know me?"

By sheer chance, Aillas had heard the man's name mentioned. "You are Sir Hune of Three Pines House."

Sir Hune nodded. "I look at you, a boy almost, and I marvel!"

"How so, Sir Hune?"

“See me! I am the very substance of the moor! One of my arms would make both your legs! Were we to drink from yonder cask I would put down four pints to your one and still be merry and clear of eye when you were snoring head-down on the table! I can hurl a lance through an oak plank; I can kill a bull with a blow. I know every trail and rock and rill of the fells; I know where the grouse nest and the pools where the trout hide. But now you arrive from Troicinet and wave a piece of paper at us to declare yourself our king. All very well, and this is the way such things are done, but what do you know of how life is lived along the moors? Have you tasted our cruel days

and bitter nights, or crept up to cut the throat of the enemy who would have preferred to cut your throat? Still your orders must be obeyed. Is there not an absurdity in all this? And I ask it in all kindness.”

“Sir Hune, it is a fair emotion which you feel and a fair question. You are indeed a doughty man, and I would not wish to wrestle you. Would you care to try me in a footrace, the loser to carry the winner back on his shoulders?”

Sir Hune laughed and slapped the table. “I know little of running. Is this what you will teach your soldiers?”

“They will run certainly, though not in battle. And as for life along these moors, I know more of it than you might think. Someday, if you are of a mind, I will tell you the story.”

Sir Hune indicated the barons in their groups. “Hear my words! If you hope to stop the bickers and ambushes, if you would halt the midnight sallies and escapades—well then, young king, you will discover a thankless task.” Sir Hune turned and, looking across the meadow, jerked his thumb. “See them now, each clan to itself! Each man gives off hate through his back for those who have done him wrong across the ages! And tell me, lad: what else have we to live

for, if it is not the hunt and the chase, the raid and the rape, and the glad slaughter of one's foe? Here is our life; it is our way and we have no other amusement.”

Aillas leaned back in his chair. “It is the life of an animal. Have you no sons and daughters?”

“I have four of both, and already two-sons are dead, and yonder stands their murderer. Soon I will take him and nail him to my gate, and have my dinner as he dies.”

Aillas rose to his feet. “Sir Hune, I like you, and if you commit this deed I will hang you with great regret. I would much

prefer to use your strength and that of your sons in my army.”

“You would hang me? What then of Dostoy yonder, who killed my sons with his black arrows?”

“And when was this deed done?”

“Last summer, before the rut.”

“And before I issued my general orders. Herald, convene the group once more to attention.”

Once again Aillas spoke to the barons, and now he stood leaning on the pommel of his sword. “I have spoken with Sir

Hune, who has launched a complaint against Sir Dostoy.”

From among the barons came a guffaw and a cry: “How dares that black-hearted villain complain in any wise whatever, him whose hand drips red with innocent blood?”

Aillas said: “At some specified time the murders must stop. I have already defined that time. I will do so once more, in terms you all can understand. Whoever commits murder, whoever kills except in self-defense-he shall be hanged. I will bring law to South Ulfland, and the sooner you realize that I am in earnest, the easier for all of us. I

need fighting men in my army; I do not want them killing each other and I do not want to waste my time hanging all the barons of the moorlands. Still, if I must I must! Go now to your homes and think well on my words.”

### III

AILLAS, RETURNING TO Ys, sought about the camp for Shimrod, without success. He sent an aide to look through the dockside taverns, but Shimrod was nowhere to be found, to Aillas' annoyance. Several matters hung heavy in his mind. First, he had cultivated a hope that Shimrod might provide some



trifle of magic-a spell of temporary meekness, to be used against such as Sir Hune; or a glossic to make Sir Hune's weapons shrivel and droop and all his arrows fly awry. Such assistance, so Aillas assured himself, would rest comfortably with Murgan's edict<sup>9</sup>, since it could be justified on humanitarian principles.

Aillas also had hoped for the weight of Shimrod's presence during a meeting with the factors of Ys, which events had now made necessary. With Shimrod off about his affairs, Aillas was cast upon his own resources and must confront the cryptic oligarchs alone.

First he must identify the responsible authorities, which he knew to be no simple process. Upon reflection, Aillas decided that Lord Pirmence was precisely qualified to the task, and sent him out to arrange the conference.

Late in the afternoon Pirmence made his report to Aillas.

“Unusual and bizarre!” declared Pirmence in response to Aillas’ question as to how the day had gone. “These folk are as subtle as eels! I can well believe them to be derived from the Minoans of Crete!”

“How does this follow?”

“I have no clear evidence,” said Pirmence. “It is a matter of intuition. These people of Ys move in that ambience of mingled innocence and mystery which is so appealing an attribute of the Minoans. Today they have bewildered me to the verge of apoplexy. I inquired everywhere for their magnates, or a council of elders, or even an influential clique, but in response received only smiling shrugs and blank looks. When pressed, the folk, after frowning and pondering and dubiously shaking their heads and staring in all directions, deny that such authority exists. When I turn away, I suspect that they are laughing at my back, but when I

swing about to surprise the insolence, they have already gone off about their business, and this is the larger indignity: they are too bored with me even to laugh.

“Finally I discovered an old man sunning himself on a bench. When I put my questions to him, he at least had the grace to make me an elucidation.

“Ys, so I discover, is controlled by an unspoken consensus. Custom and convenience take the place of coercive law; at Ys the concept of central authority is felt to be both repugnant and faintly ridiculous. I asked the old fellow: ‘Who then is qualified to represent the

city in a consultation with King Aillas upon important business?’ He gave me a typical shrug, and said: ‘I know of no important business and do not see fit to so consult.’

“At this moment a kindly lady came by. She helped the gentleman to his feet and they went off together. From the solicitude of her manner, I gathered that the old fellow suffers from some advanced form of senile dementia, and so perhaps his analysis is not totally accurate.”

Pirmence paused to chuckle and to preen his neat beard. Aillas reflected that the decision not to hang Pirmence outright,

but rather to exploit his devious skills, had so far worked to advantage. “What next?”

Pirmence continued with his report. “I refused to be thwarted either by evasions, vagaries or the ravings of a madman, if such they were. I told myself that natural law operated at Ys as rigorously as elsewhere, and that, inevitably, the most influential factors would tend to inhabit the oldest and finest of the palaces. I visited several of these and informed the resident factors that, since everyone in Ys denied the existence of a governing council, I now took it upon myself to appoint such a body, of which these gentlemen were

now full and fast members. Further, I notified them that they were stringently required to meet with you at mid-morning tomorrow.”

“Clever and ingenious! Well done, Pirmence! Would it not be a great joke if I came to find you indispensable?”

Pirmence dourly shook his head. “I have transcended that phase in my intellectual growth where I discover humour in simple freakishness. What exists is real; therefore it is tragic, since whatever lives must die. Only fantasy, the vapors rising from sheer nonsense, can now excite my laughter.”

“Ah, Pirmence, your philosophy lies beyond my understanding.”

“Just as yours does mine,” said Pirmence with courtly grace.

Next day at mid-morning six factors strolled down from the city and made their way to the blue silk pavilion where Aillas waited in company with Lord Maloof and Lord Pirmence. The factors seemed much alike: slight of physique, almost pallid of complexion, with fine features, dark eyes and black hair cut short and clasped with golden fillets. Their dress was modest: white linen kirtles and sandals, and none bore arms.



Aillas came forward to meet them.

“Gentlemen, I am pleased to welcome you. Be seated. These are my aides Lord Maloof and Lord Pirmence, both men of cultivated experience and totally dedicated to our common goals. Will you take refreshment?” Without waiting for response, Aillas signaled to his stewards, who served out goblets of wine, which the factors ignored.

“Our business today is of considerable importance,” said Aillas. “I hope that we can conduct it efficiently and with decision.

“The background is this: by reason of weak rulers, Ska attacks, and general

demoralization, South Ulfland, save for the Vale of Evander, has become a wilderness. I intend to restore order and law, beat back the Ska, and eventually restore South Ulfland to its former prosperity. In pursuing these purposes, I cannot for long rely upon Troice blood or Troice gold: the resources must come from South Ulfland.

“My first concern is an army to enforce the law and to repel the Ska. In this regard no one is exempt from service. That is the thrust of our business for today.”

The factors rose to their feet and, bowing, turned to depart. “Wait!” called

Aillas. “Where are you going?”

“Are you not finished with your remarks?” inquired one of the factors.

“You said that they would be brief.”

“Not that brief! I also said that we must make decisions. Will you act as spokesman, or will each speak his mind as occasion dictates?” Aillas looked from face to face, but discovered only empty expressions.

“I am unaccustomed to such modesty,” said Aillas. “You, sir, what is your name?”

“I am styled Hydelos.”

“I now appoint you the Honourable Hydelos, Chairman of the Council. The six of you, naturally, comprise the council. You, sir: your name?”

“I too am styled Hydelos.”

“Indeed! How are you distinguished from this other Hydelos?”

“By our intimate names.”

“What, then, is your intimate name? We must be practical.”

“It is Olave.”

“Olave, you are appointed overseer of

military conscription. The two gentlemen sitting next to you will be your assistants. You will recruit for the Ulf army up and down the Vale of Evander. Maloof, record their names, both intimate and otherwise. You, sir, how are you styled?"

"I am Eukanor."

"Eukanor, you are now tax collector for the Vale of Evander. The gentleman at your left hand will assist you. Maloof, record their names. Hydelos, I hope that the conference is moving briskly enough to please you. Your duties will be, first, supervision, and I need not spell out the details at this moment; and also you will

serve as liaison officer between the others of the council and myself, or my representative. You must render a daily report.”

Hydelos said gently: “Sir, your requirements are impossible and cannot be effected.”

Aillas laughed. “Hydelos, I urge you to face facts, no matter how reluctantly. You must alter your style of life, at least until South Ulfland is once again whole. You have no choice and I will hear no arguments. If the six of you will not work with me, I must exile you to the Isle of Terns, and try six other folk of Ys, until either I find proper

cooperation, or until all Ys has been transported to the dismal crags of the isle.

“My requirements, in the context of today, are not oppressive and can easily be effected. I am your king and I so command.”

Hydelos spoke in a voice wherein the petulance was carefully restrained: “We have existed many years with neither king, nor army nor taxes; the Ska have never threatened us, nor are we in danger from the barons. Why should we now be hasty to obey a Troice invader?”

“You tolerated Faude Carfilhiot at

Tintzin Fyral; you ignored the Ska on their slave-raids; you bought peace for yourselves with the pain of others!

These carefree days are gone, and you must share the costs of justice!

Gentlemen, this very instant, choose; I will argue not another word.”

“No need,” said Hydelos softly. “We are persuaded.”

“Very well. Maloof will furnish details of what must be done.” Aillas rose to his feet, bowed to the disconsolate factors and turned away. He stopped short at the sight of a tall figure approaching across the compound. With the conference at an end, and all issues resolved, Shimrod at



last had elected to show himself at the camp.

# Chapter 6

## I

DURING A PERIOD IN THE PAST, not long after Shimrod had taken up residence at Trilda, in the Forest of Tantrevalles, his sleep had been disturbed by a series of dreams. They came night after night, in a sequence which obsessed Shimrod's attention, despite a cadence to the events which suggested that their resolution might be fateful, and perhaps even tragic.

The dreams were extraordinary for several reasons. The locale, a white

beach with the ocean to one side and a white villa to the other, never altered. There were neither illogical nor grotesque elements to the events; indeed, their most startling quality was the haunting beauty of a woman who, alone with Shimrod, inhabited the dreams.

In the first of the sequence, Shimrod found himself standing by the balustrade in front of the villa. The sunlight was warm; the sound of low surf came with languid regularity. Shimrod waited in a mood of expectation. Presently, looking up the beach, he saw approaching a dark-haired woman of middle height, slender, almost slight. She walked barefoot and wore a white gown, knee-

length and sleeveless. Without haste she approached, and passed in front of Shimrod. With a single sideglance, she continued on her way and Shimrod was left to look after her with pangs of wonder and yearning.

The dream faded and went its way, to whatever place dreams go when their time has passed, and Shimrod awoke, to lie staring into the dark.

On the next night the dream returned, and again on the next, and so it went. On each occasion the woman deigned a trifle more warmth, and at last she paused and listened as he spoke. He tried to learn her identity and why she

came this way; and finally she specified a time and place outside the confines of the dream where they might meet. A pulse of exultation surged through Shimrod, even though he knew that the occasion must almost definitely be intended for his misfortune. He therefore took counsel with Murgan, at the castle Swer Smod, on the flanks of the Teach tac Teach.

Murgan laid the plot bare. The woman was Melancthe, and she worked at the command of Tamurello. What was their purpose? No mystery here. Tamurello intended to confuse and weaken Murgan by destroying his scion Shimrod.

A single question remained, the age-old cry of anguish: “How could one so beautiful be so base?”

In this regard Murgan could offer no explanation.

Shimrod kept the rendezvous, but the plot had been vitiated and Shimrod retained his life. Later, when he first visited Ys, he discovered the beach on which Melancthe had walked, and, half a mile to the north, the white villa where in his dreams he had awaited the coming of Melancthe.

Shimrod could now remember the episode with dispassion and even a

flicker of curiosity. There was another matter: an obligation which had never been fulfilled. How Melanthe might deal with this obligation was a question which, in due course, prompted Shimrod to slip quietly away from Ys and saunter up the beach.

He arrived at the front of the villa and halted beside the balustrade; déjà vu hung heavy in the air. Looking up the beach, as if in a reprise of his dreams, he observed the approach of Melanthe.

As before, she wore a knee-length white gown and walked barefoot. If she felt surprise at the sight of Shimrod, she gave no such indication and her pace

neither slowed nor quickened.

Melancthe arrived at the gate. Her eyes flickered a single instant toward Shimrod; then, ignoring his presence, she climbed the steps to the terrace and disappeared into the shadows of the colonnade.

Shimrod followed behind her and so entered the villa, which he had never before visited.

Melancthe crossed the hall and went into a chamber with an arcade of windows overlooking the ocean. She seated herself on a couch beside a low table, and leaning back stared out toward the



horizon.

Shimrod quietly drew up a chair and sat at the end of the table, where he could watch her without turning his head.

A maid entered with a tall silver ewer, and poured for Melancthe a goblet of wine punch, fragrant with the juice of oranges and lemons. Melancthe, paying no heed to Shimrod, sipped from her goblet, and again looked out over the sea.

Shimrod watched with head cocked at a quizzical angle. He considered lifting the ewer in both his hands and drinking from the side, but concluded that such an act,

with its hint of vulgarity, might compromise his already fragile acceptance. Instead he worked a small spell. Into the room flew a blue and red bird, to circle Melanthe's head and settle on the rim of her goblet. It chirped a time or two, committed a nuisance into the goblet and flew away.

With studied deliberation Melanthe leaned forward and placed the goblet on the table.

Shimrod spoke another quiet spell. A small Moorish slave-boy wearing an enormous blue turban, a red and blue striped shin and pale blue puff-breeches, appeared in the doorway. He carried a

tray with a pair of silver goblets. He proffered the tray to Melanthe, and stood waiting.

With a still face Melanthe took one of the goblets and set it on the table. The boy approached Shimrod, who graciously accepted the other goblet and drank of its contents with satisfaction. The slave-boy departed the room.

With lips thrust forward at the center and drooping dolefully at the corners, Melanthe continued to study the sea.

Shimrod thought: ‘How she schemes! In her mind she formulates plan after plan, then discards each in turn as ineffective,

or crass, or not in accord with her dignity. She can discover no words which will not leave her vulnerable to whatever reproaches or demands I choose to make. So long as she is silent, she commits herself to nothing and thinks to hold me at bay! But pressure builds inside her; at some point she must undertake an initiative.' Shimrod noticed a twitch at the corners of Melancthe's mouth. 'She has come to a decision,' he told himself. 'Her least graceful but most effective course is to rise to her feet and leave the room; naturally, I can not follow her into the lavatory and still retain my reputation for gallantry. Well, then, let us see! Her conduct will reveal much in regard to her mood.'

Melancthe tilted her head back and seemed to go to sleep. Shimrod rose and went to look about the room. There was little furniture and an odd lack of personal belongings: neither articles of skill and craftsmanship nor curios, nor yet scrolls, books, librams or portfolios. On a side-table a green faience bowl held a dozen oranges; nearby a group of water-washed pebbles which had given Melancthe pleasure were spread at random. Three Mauretanian rugs lay on the floor, woven in bold patterns of blue, black and red on a buff background. A heavy candelabra of black iron hung from the ceiling. On the table in front of Melancthe a bronze bowl displayed a

bouquet of orange marigolds, no doubt arranged by the maid. Essentially, thought Shimrod, the room was neutral and reflected nothing of Melancthe.

Melancthe spoke at last: “How long do you intend to stay here?”

Shimrod returned to his chair. “I am free for the rest of the day, and the night as well, if it comes to that.”

“You have a most casual attitude toward time.”

” ‘Casual’? I think not. It is a subject of great interest. According to the Esqs of Galicia, time is a pyramid of thirteen

sides. They believe that we stand at the apex and overlook days, months and years in all directions. This is the first premise of Thudhic Perdurics, as enunciated by Thudh, the Galician god of time, whose thirteen eyes ring his head so that he may perceive in all directions at once. The visual capability, of course, is symbolic.”

“Has this doctrine any immediate effect?”

“I would think so. Novel ideas exercise our minds and enliven our conversation. For instance, while we are still discussing Thudh, you might be interested to learn that each year the Esq

magicians alter a hundred human fetuses, hoping that one may be born with thirteen eyes in a circlet around its forehead, and thus would they know Thudh's avatar! So far, nine eyes is their limit of capability, and these become priests of the cult."

"I find no great interest in such things, nor in the conversation as a whole," said Melancthe. "You may leave as soon as you feel that courtesy makes this demand upon you."

"At that time I will do so," said Shimrod. "As for now, if you permit, I will call your servant that she may bring us more wine, and perhaps prepare a pot



of mussels cooked with oil and garlic. Served with new bread, this is a hearty dish, consumed by folk of good conscience.”

Melancthe turned away from the table. “I am not hungry.”

“Are you tired?” asked Shimrod solicitously. “I will come rest with you on your bed.”

Melancthe turned him a slow golden glance from the side of her eye. She said presently: “Whatever I do, I prefer to be alone.”

“Really? It was not so in the old days.

You sought me out with regularity.”

“I have changed completely since that time. I am in no way the same person.”

“Why this metamorphosis?”

Melancthe rose to her feet. “By living quietly alone, I had hoped to avoid intrusions into my privacy. To some extent I have succeeded.”

“And now you have no friends?”

Melancthe shrugged and, turning away, went to the window. Shimrod came to stand close behind her. The odor of violets came to his nostrils. “Your

response is ambiguous.”

“I have no friends.”

“What of Tamurello?”

“He is not a friend.”

“I hope he is not your lover.”

“Such relationships are of no interest to me.”

“What sort of relationship is of interest?”

Melancthe, glancing over her shoulder and finding Shimrod uncomfortably close, moved a step to the side. “I have

given the matter no thought.”

“Do you wish to learn magic?”

“I do not care to be a witch.”

Shimrod returned to his chair. “You are something of a puzzle.” He clapped his hands, and the servant appeared.

“Melancthe, will you ask for the wine to be served?”

Melancthe sighed and gave a signal to the servant, and went back to the couch in a manner of strained resignation.

The maid returned with wine and a pair of goblets, and served both Shimrod and

Melancthe.

Shimrod said: “Once I thought of you as a child in a woman’s body.”

Melancthe smiled a cool smile. “And now?”

“The child seems to have wandered away.”

Melancthe’s smile became a trifle wistful.

“The woman is as beautiful as the dawn,” said Shimrod. “I wonder if she realizes this. She seems to be clean; she uses a certain degree of effort to tend her

hair. She carries herself like a woman who is well aware of her charm.”

Melancthe spoke in a colorless voice: “You insist upon boring me.”

Shimrod paid her no heed. “It would seem that you are content with your life and yourself. Still, when I try to enter your mind I am lost as if in a jungle.”

Melancthe responded flatly: “That is because I am not truly a human being.”

“Who taught you this? Tamurello?”

Melancthe gave an indifferent nod. “These are dull topics. When will you

leave?”

“Soon. But tell me this: why did Tamurello teach you such extraordinary folly?”

“He taught me nothing. I know nothing. My mind is empty, like the dark places behind the stars.”

Shimrod asked: “Do you consider me human?”

“So I would guess.”

“I am Murgan’s scion.”

“This is something I do not understand.”

“At a time now far in the past, Murgan went abroad in this guise, that he might act and do and see as someone other than the fabulous Murgan. I know nothing of those times; Murgan controlled my deeds and the memories are his. Eventually, through usage, Shimrod took on substance and became real, and no longer was he connected with Murgan.

“Now I am Shimrod. Should I not think myself a man? I look like a man. I hunger and thirst; I eat and drink and in due course void the dross. I am gladdened by joy and I weep tears for grief. When I see your beauty I feel a wistful longing which is both sweet and hurtful. In short, I am all too human, and if not, I notice



nothing of the lack.”

Melancthe looked back to the sea. “My shape is human; my body like yours performs its functions; I see, I hear, I taste. But I am empty. I have no emotion. I do nothing but walk the beach.”

Shimrod moved to sit on the couch beside her. He put his arm around her shoulders. “Let me fill the emptiness.”

Melancthe showed him a sardonic sideglance. “I am well enough as I am.”

“You will be better when you are different. Far better.”

Melancthe pulled away and went to stand by the window.

Shimrod, with nothing more to say, chose this moment to depart, and did so without words of farewell.

On the following day Shimrod went back to the white villa, calculatedly at the same time. If Melancthe followed her routine of yesterday, he would learn something of her mood. He waited beside the terrace for an hour but Melancthe failed to appear. At last he went thoughtfully back to Ys.

During the late afternoon the fine weather failed before a fresh breeze

from the west; a high mesh of cirrus flew at speed across the sky, and the sun sank into a purple bank of nimbus.

In the morning brightness and gloom struggled to control the landscape. Shafts of sunlight burst down through rents in the clouds, only to be constricted and shut off. So it went until afternoon, when black walls of rain swept in from the sea.

Late in the day Shimrod, on impulse, threw a cloak around his shoulders and, after making a purchase at the market, strode down the beach to the white villa. He climbed the steps, crossed the terrace and made his presence known by

rapping upon the carved wooden door.

He discovered no response and rapped again. At last the door opened a crack and the serving maid looked out. "Lady Melancthe is receiving no guests."

Shimrod pushed through the door.

"Excellent; we will not be disturbed by intruders. I will be staying for supper; here are some excellent cutlets. Broil them properly with herbs and serve a good red wine. Where is Melancthe?"

"In the parlour with the fire."

"I will find my way."

The maid went dubiously to her kitchen. Shimrod, looking from room to room, presently discovered the parlour: a chamber with white walls and an oak-beamed ceiling. Melanthe stood warming herself by the fire. As Shimrod came into the room, she looked over her shoulder, then turned moodily back to look down into the flames.

Shimrod approached. Without looking at him she said: "I knew that you would come tonight."

Shimrod put his arm around her waist and drawing her close, kissed her. He found no response; he might as well have kissed the back of his hand. "Well

then-are you pleased to see me?"

"No."

"But neither are you trembling with anger?" "No."

"I kissed you once before; do you remember?" Melancthe turned to face him. Shimrod understood that he was about to hear a well-rehearsed statement. "I remember almost nothing of that occasion. Tamurello instructed me exactly. I was to promise you anything and, if need be, accede to any demand you might make of me. It proved not to be necessary."

“And the promises: are they to be broken?”

“They were’ spoken through my mouth, but they were Tamurello’s promises. You must look to him for their satisfaction.” And Melancthe smiled down into the fire.

Shimrod, still with his arm around her waist, pulled her close and put his face to her hair, but she detached herself and went to sit on the couch.

Shimrod came to sit beside her. “I am not the world’s wisest man, as well you know. Still, there is much which I can teach you.”

“You pursue an illusion,” said Melancthe, almost contemptuously. “How so?”

“You are affected by the look of my body. If you looked at me and saw a wrinkled yellow skin and a crooked nose with warts, you would not be here tonight, and even if you were you would not kiss me.”

“There is no denying any of this,” said Shimrod. “Still, I am hardly unique. Would you choose to live in such a body?”

“I am accustomed to this one; and I know it is beautiful. Still, what lives inside the



body is something which is probably not at all beautiful.”

The serving maid entered the room.

“Shall I lay supper in here by the fire?”

Melancthe looked around in puzzlement.

“I ordered no supper.”

“This gentleman brought out some fine cutlets and commanded that they be properly cooked, and so they are: broiled over vine cuttings, with garlic and lemon and a whiff of thyme, and there is a new loaf, some nice fresh peas and the good red wine is ready to drink.”

“Serve us in here, then.”

During the meal Shimrod worked to achieve an atmosphere of warmth and ease, with little encouragement from Melancthe. Immediately after the supper, she announced that she was tired and intended to retire to her bed.

“There is rain,” Shimrod observed. “I will stay tonight.”

“The rain has stopped,” said Melancthe. “Go now, Shimrod; I want no one in my bed save myself.”

Shimrod rose to his feet. “I can depart as graciously as the next man. Melancthe, I wish you good night.”

## II

A STEADY GRAY RAIN  
DISCOURAGED SHIMROD from new  
Ventures up the beach. Tactical  
considerations also gave him pause: an  
excess of zeal might do his cause more  
harm than good. For the moment enough  
had been done. He had brought the  
unique flavor of his personality to  
Melancthe's attention; he had shown  
himself to be gentle, steadfast,  
entertaining and considerate; he had  
demonstrated a reassuring degree of  
ordinary human lust: more might have  
been considered coarse; less would  
have demeaned Melancthe's charm and

caused her to wonder about both herself and him.

Shimrod sat in the common room of the Rope and Anchor, his favorite of the dockside taverns, drinking ale, watching the rain, and musing upon Melanthe.

She was, beyond question, a fascinating case. Her beauty was a vast treasure; her body seemed too slight to support so urgent a weight. Shimrod wondered: could this beauty alone be the source of her attraction? Where else was her charm?

Looking out across the rainswept water, Shimrod listed those endearing traits

common to all lovable and beloved women. Melancthe lacked them all, including the mysterious and indefinable quality of femininity itself.

Melancthe had asserted the emptiness of her mind; Shimrod saw that he had no choice but to believe her. Conspicuously absent were curiosity, humour, warmth and sympathy. She used that total candor which was not truly honesty so much as indifference to the sensibilities of those who heard her. He could remember no trace of emotion other than boredom and the mild repugnance she seemed to feel for him.

Shimrod ruefully drank his ale and

looked up the beach, but the white villa could not be seen for the rain. . . . He nodded slowly to himself, awed by the profundity of a new concept. Melanthe represented the witch Desmei's last act and her final revenge on Man. Melanthe in her present state was a blankness upon which every man might project his idealized version of ultimate beauty, but when he tried to possess this beauty and make it his own, he would discover a void, and so, according to his capacity, suffer as Desmei had suffered!

Assuming these conjectures to be correct, mused Shimrod, how would they affect Melanthe, were she to learn of them? If she knew her condition, how

ardently might she wish to change it?  
Could she change, even if she wished to  
do so?

Aillas came into the tavern. He went to  
dry himself by the fire, then he and  
Shimrod took their supper in an alcove  
to the side of the common room.  
Shimrod inquired as to the new Ulf army  
and Aillas declared himself not at all  
discouraged.

“Indeed, taking all with all, I could  
expect no better progress. Every day I  
get a new influx of recruits and the  
number grows. Today there were fifty-  
five: strong young lads down from the  
moors and mountains, each as brave as a

lion and each prepared to teach me the lore of warfare, which is hiding in the gorse until a sufficiently small group of the enemy happens to pass, after which throats are cut, purses are ransacked, and swift retreat is made; that is all there is to it.”

“And what of your nine recalcitrant barons?”

“I am happy to report that all presented themselves before the appointed time. None were precisely humble, but the point has been made and I was not forced to march up into the moors-not yet, at any rate.”



“They still watch and wait, and wonder how best to circumvent you.”

“True, and sooner or later I will be forced to hang a number of incredulous Ulfs, when I would much prefer that they kill themselves fighting the Ska, and even these young Ulf firebrands talk in subdued voices when the Ska are mentioned.”

“This should encourage them to learn Ska discipline.”

“Unfortunately they are convinced that the Ska can eat them alive, and the battle is lost before the armies so much as face each other. I will have to bring them to it

very gradually and rely upon my Troice troops until we win a few victories. Then their pride and manhood will be called into question, and they will be anxious to outdo the Troice outlanders.”

“Assuming, of course, that you can beat them with your Troice army.”

“I have few fears on that score. The Ska are military experts, no question as to this, but they are relatively few, and each man must fight like five. On the obverse, each Ska casualty is like five, and that is my plan: to bleed them white.”

“You seem resigned to a war with the

Ska.”

“How can it be avoided? In the Ska program, South Ulfland must necessarily be next on the list. As soon as they feel strong enough they will try us out, but not before I am ready for them, or so I hope.”

“And when hostilities occur?”

“I will not attack their strength, that is certain. If I had the full support of the barons, my way would be easier.”

Aillas drank from his goblet. “Today I heard a strange report, from Sir Kyr, who is second son to Sir Kaven, of Black Eagle Keep. Three days ago a

knight, purportedly Daut from Dahaut's Western March, stopped by Black Eagle Keep. He named himself Sir Shalles and reported in all seriousness that soon there will be a war and that King Casmir will conquer Troicinet, so that all those who ally themselves with King Aillas now will be driven from their castles. Better, he says, to organize a secret cabal of resistance in the defense of Ulf liberties."

Shimrod chuckled. "I assume that you are looking for Sir Shalles."

"Most definitely. Sir Kyr himself rides at speed for the moors, that he may track down Sir Shalles, capture him and bring

him here.”

### III

THE RAINS DEPARTED; dawn was clear and soft. In the square Shimrod noticed Melancthe's serving maid arriving at the market with a basket. Shimrod went to speak to her. “Good morning to you! It is I, Shimrod!”

“I remember you well, sir; you have a fine taste in cutlets.”

“And you have a fine hand in their broiling!”

“That is true, if I myself must admit it.

Part of the virtue lies in the vine cuttings; nothing does so well for pork.”

“I could not agree more. Was your mistress appreciative?”

“Ah, she is a strange one; sometimes I doubt if she knows what she eats, and cares much less. I notice that she picked the bones of the cutlets, and I will buy some more today, and perhaps a pair of plump fowl. These I like to cut small and fry in olive oil with much garlic, and turn out the whole dish, oil and all, over bread.”

“You have the soul of a poet. Perhaps I will-”

The maid interrupted him. "I am sorry to say that I am no longer allowed to admit you to the house. This is a pity, since the lady is in need of someone to admire her. She is so sad that I suspect an enchantment."

"Not impossible! Does Tamurello come to call?"

"In truth, I know of no one who visits her, save yourself and yesterday certain factors from the town, that they might mark her on their rolls."

"Surely a most solitary life!"

The maid hesitated. "Perhaps I should

not say this, but tonight is the night of the half-moon waning, and when the weather is fine Lady Melancthe leaves the house an hour before midnight, and returns somewhat later; after moondown. Truly, I fear for her, since this is not altogether a kind coast.”

“You are wise to tell me this.” Shimrod gave the maid a gold crown. “This will help when you marry.”

“Indeed it will, and my thanks to you! Please do not take it to heart if I say that you may not come again to the house.”

“I wonder why.”



“The lady evidently finds nothing in you to amuse her, and that is the truth of it.”

“Most strange!” said Shimrod despondently. “I have succeeded with ladies of every degree, from high to low. A fairy damsel at one time became my lover; the Duchess Lydia of Loermel conferred significant favors upon me. Yet here, on this barren and almost forgotten coast a maiden living alone in a villa bars me from her sight. Is it not a farce?”

“Very strange, sir!” The maid dimpled. “Were you to come knocking on my door, I would not turn you away.”

“Aha! We must look into that!” Shimrod seized the maid, kissed her soundly on both cheeks, and sent her smiling away to market.

## IV

SHIMROD PREPARED WITH CARE for the night's adventure. He donned a black cloak and arranged the hood so as to cover his sandy-brown hair and to shadow his face. At the last minute, almost as an afterthought, he rubbed the soles of his sandals with water-spice, that he might be enabled to walk on water. Tonight he doubted if the facility would be needed, though at other times it

had served him well, except in heavy surf when the charm tended to be a nuisance.

Afterglow gave way to dark night and the waning half-moon started down the sky. At last Shimrod set off up the beach. Approaching the villa, Shimrod climbed the shore dune and settled himself where he could watch in comfort.

From within the villa yellow lamplight outlined a row of high windows. One by one the lamps were snuffed and the villa went dark.

Shimrod waited while the moon descended the sky. From the villa came

a shape, conspicuous only as a blot moving across the sand. The size of the blot and the rhythm of its motion identified Melanthe. Shimrod followed at a discreet distance.

Melanthe walked purposefully, but without haste; so far as Shimrod could determine, she showed no interest in the possibility of someone following.

She walked half a mile, just above the reach of the glimmering surf, and presently arrived at a ledge of dark stone which, thrusting into the sea, created a rough little peninsula something over a hundred feet long. In bad weather, waves would break over the ledge; in

the calm of the dying moon, the waves merely flowed over the low areas with intermittent sucking and gurgling sounds.

Arriving at the ledge, Melanthe paused a moment and took stock of her surroundings. Shimrod halted, crouched and pulled the hood about his face.

Melanthe took no heed of him. She climbed up on the rock and picked her way out toward the end, where a smooth wave-washed shoulder of stone created a vantage a man's height above the water. Melanthe seated herself on the stone and looked out to sea.

Crouching low, Shimrod scuttled

forward like a great black rat and crawled up on the ledge. With great care, testing each step for loose footing, he moved forward. ... A sound behind him: the pad of slow steps!

Shimrod threw himself to the side and huddled into black shade under a jut of rock.

The steps shuffled close; peering up from under the hood Shimrod saw a creature half-lit by moonlight: a squat torso, massive legs, a distorted head with a low crest. The air disturbed by the creature's passage carried a reek which caused Shimrod to hold his breath, then exhale slowly.

The creature shuffled out toward the end of the ledge. Shimrod heard a muffled conversation, then silence. He raised himself to a crouching position and went cautiously forward. Melancthe's silhouette blotted out the stars to the west. Nearby huddled the creature who had come after her. Both stared out to sea.

Minutes passed. A dark shape rising from below broke the surface with a hiss and a soft coughing sound. It floated to the end of the ledge and pulled itself up to squat beside Melancthe. Again there was a conversation, which Shimrod could not overhear, then the three sat in silence.

The half-moon settled low, into a long frail wisp of cloud. The three creatures moved somewhat closer together. The sea-thing produced a soft contralto tone. Melancthe uttered a sound somewhat higher in register; the land-thing sang a vibrant deep note. The chord, if such it might be called, persisted for ten seconds, then one after the other the singers changed their tones and the chord altered, then dwindled into silence.

Shivers ran along Shimrod's skin. The sound was of a strange desolate nature, of a sort unfamiliar to Shimrod. Silence held at the end of the ledge as the three brooded upon the quality of their music. Then the land-thing produced its deep



throbbing sound. Melancthe sang:  
“Ahhhh-ohhhhh” in a descending pitch  
across an octave. The sea-thing uttered a  
contralto tone like the chime of a far sea-  
bell. The sounds altered, in timbre and  
pitch; the chord dwindled into silence,  
and Shimrod, skulking low in the  
shadows, returned to the beach, where  
he felt less vulnerable to whatever  
magic might be latent in the sounds.

Fifteen minutes passed. The half-moon  
became yellow-green and sank into the  
sea. In the dim light the three at the end  
of the ledge were almost invisible... .  
Once again they sang their chords, and  
Shimrod wondered at the melancholy  
sweetness of the sounds and their

ineffable loneliness.

Silence again. Time passed: ten minutes. The land-thing padded across the rock to the shore. Shimrod watched it mount the slope and disappear into a gully. ... He waited. Melanthe came along the ledge of rock, jumped down to the sand and set off down the beach. As she came to the spot where Shimrod sat, she halted and peered through the dark.

Shimrod rose to his feet, and Melanthe turned to go her way. Shimrod fell in step beside her. She said nothing.

Finally Shimrod asked: "For whom are you singing?"

“No one.”

“Why do you go there?”

“Because I choose to do so.”

“Who are those creatures?”

“Outcasts like myself.”

“Do you talk? Or do other than sing?”

Melanthe laughed, a strange low laugh.

“Shimrod, you are ruled by your brain.  
You are as calm as a cow.”

Shimrod decided that silence gave him better credence than hot denial, and so they returned to the villa.

Without a word or a backward glance  
Melanthe turned through the portal,  
crossed the terrace and was gone.

Shimrod continued back to Ys,  
dissatisfied and convinced that he had  
conducted himself incorrectly: in what  
fashion, he could not say. Also, what  
might have been gained by proper  
deportment? Perhaps a seat in the choir?

Melanthe: hauntingly, strangely,  
beautiful!

Melanthe: singing across the sea while  
the waning moon sank low! Perhaps in  
sheer passion he should have seized her  
as they returned along the beach and

taken her by force. At least she would not have criticized him for intellectuality!

Even in this program, so superficially attractive, definite flaws existed. Even while repugning the charges of intellectuality, Shimrod still comported himself by the precepts of gallantry, which were uncompromising in such cases. Shimrod decided to think no more of Melanthe: "She is not for me."

In the morning, the sun rose into another fine day. Shimrod sat brooding at a table in front of the Rope and Anchor. A falcon swerved down from the sky and dropped a willow twig upon the table

before him, then flew away.

Shimrod looked at the twig with a grimace. But there was no help for it. He rose to his feet and sought out Aillas. “Murgen has summoned me and I must go.”

Aillas was not pleased. “Where must you go and why? And when will you be back?”

“I have no answers for these questions; when Murgen calls, I must respond,”

“Farewell then.”

Shimrod tossed his few belongings into

a sack, crushed the twig in his fingers and called out: “Willow, willow, take me now where I must go!”

Shimrod felt a rush of wind and the ground whirled beneath him. He glimpsed upland forests, the peaks of the Teach tac Teach ranked in a long line to north and south; then he slid down a long chute of air to the deck beside the entry to Murgén’s stone manse Swer Smod.

A black iron door eleven feet tall barred his way. The central panel displayed an iron Tree of Life. Iron lizards clinging to the trunk hissed and, darting iron tongues, scuttled to new vantages; iron birds hopped from branch to branch,

first peering down at Shimrod, then avidly inspecting the iron fruit which none dared taste and occasionally producing small chiming sounds.

Shimrod spoke a cantrap, to soothe the sandestin who controlled the door:

“Door, open to me, and let me pass unscathed. Heed only my true wishes, without reference to the mischievous caprices of my dark under-minds.”

The door whispered: “Shimrod, the way is clear, though you are over-fastidious in your stipulations.”

Shimrod forebore argument and advanced upon the door, which swung



aside and allowed him access to a foyer illuminated by a glass dome of green, golden-yellow and carmine-red panes.

Shimrod selected one of the passages leading away from the foyer and so entered Murgan's private hall.

At a heavy table sat Murgan, legs outstretched to the fire. Today he appeared in the semblance which so long before he had conferred upon Shimrod: a tall spare form with a gaunt bony face, dust-colored hair, a whimsical mouth and a set of casual mannerisms.

Shimrod stopped short. "Must you

confront me as myself? It is distracting to be instructed or, worse, chided under these circumstances.”

“An oversight,” said Murgan.

“Ordinarily I would not work this prank upon you, but now, as I think of it, the exercise of dealing with unfamiliar concepts from your own mouth may be of ultimate value.”

“With due respect, I consider the point farfetched.” Shimrod advanced into the room. “Well then, if you will not change, I will sit with my back partially turned.”

Murgan gave an indifferent wave of the hand. “It is all one. Will you take

refreshment?” He snapped his fingers and flasks of both mead and beer appeared on the table, along with a platter of bread and cold meats.

Shimrod contented himself with a mug of beer, while Murgan elected to drink mead from a tall pewter tankard. Murgan asked: “Have the priests at the temple dealt courteously with you?”

“You refer to the Temple of Atlante? I never troubled to pay them my respects, nor have they sought me out. Is any gain to be had from their acquaintance?”

“They have long traditions which they are willing to recite. The steps leading

down from the temple are impressive and perhaps merit a visit. On a calm day, when the sun is high, a keen eye can look down through the water and count thirty-four steps before they disappear into the murk. The priests claim that the number of steps above the surface is dwindling: either the land is sinking or the sea is rising: such is their reasoning.”

Shimrod reflected. “Either case is hard to credit. I suspect that their first count was made at low tide; then later, when the tide was at flood, they made their second count, and so were misled.”

“That is a practical explanation,” said Murgan. “It seems plausible enough.” He

glanced toward Shimrod. “You drink only sparingly. Is the beer too thin?”

“Not at all. I merely wish to keep my wits about me. It would not do if both of us became addled, and later woke up in doubt as to who was who.”

Murgen drank from his pewter tankard.

“The risk is small.”

“True. Still, I will keep my head clear until I learn why you have summoned me here to Swer Smod.”

“Why else? I need your help.”

“I cannot refuse you, nor would I if I

could.”

“Well spoken, Shimrod! I will come to the point. Essentially, I am irked with Tamurello. He resents my authority and obtrudes his force on my own; ultimately, of course, he hopes to destroy me. At the moment his work is ostensibly trivial or even playful, but, if left unchallenged, it could become dangerous, after this analogy: a man attacked by a single wasp has little to fear; if ten thousand wasps attack him, he is doomed. I cannot give Tamurello’s activity the care it deserves; I would be diverted from other work of great importance. Hence, I assign this task to you. At the very least, your vigilance

will distract him exactly as he hopes to distract me.”

Shimrod frowned into the fire. “It might be wiser to destroy him, once and for all.”

“That is easier said than done. I would be perceived as a tyrant, so that the other magicians might decide to form a concert of defense against me, with unpredictable consequences.”

Shimrod asked: “How, then, shall I watch him? What must I look for?”

“I will instruct you in due course. Tell me how things go in South Ulfland.”

“There is nothing much to report. Aillas trains an army of lummoxes, and has had signal success; now, when he cries out ‘March right!’, most of them do so. I have attempted a social relationship with Melancthe, to no avail. She feels that I over-intellectualize. No doubt I could win her approval if I chose to sing a fourth part with her choral group.”

“Interesting! Melancthe then is musical?”

Shimrod related his experiences on the night of the waning moon. Murgan commented: “Melancthe is woefully confused as to her identity, which Desmei purposely left empty, in derision



and revenge against the masculine race.”

Shimrod glowered into the fire. “I will think no more about her; she is as she is.”

“A wise decision. Now, in connection with Tamurello ...” Murgan issued his instructions, after which Shimrod was once again sent whirling through the sky, this time south and east to Trilda, his manse at the edge of Forest Tantrevalles.

## V

THE ANCIENT ROAD KNOWN AS OLD STREET traversed Lyonesse from Cape Farewell in the west to Bulmer

Skeme in the east. At a place halfway along its length, not far from the village Tawn Twillett, a lane branched off to the north. Up hill and down dale went the lane, by hawthorn hedges and old stone fences, past drowsy farmsteads and across the River Sipp by a low stone bridge. Entering the Forest of Tantrevalles, the lane wound through sun and shadow for another mile, then broke out into Lally Meadow, passed by Shimrod's manse Trilda, and ended at a woodcutter's dock on Lally Water.

Trilda, a stone and timber cottage at the back of a flower garden, was notable for its six dormers in a high gabled roof: two to each of the upstairs front

bedrooms. The ground floor included a foyer, two parlours, a dining saloon, four bedchambers, a library and workroom, a kitchen with an attached pantry and buttery, and several rooms of convenience. Four bays with diamond-paned windows overlooked the front garden, and all the glass of all the windows had been enchanted by spells of low magic, so that they remained at all times sparkling and clear, with no trace of dirt, fly-speck, streak, nor the dimness of dust.

Trilda had been designed by Hilario, a minor magician of many quaint notions, and built overnight by a band of goblin carpenters who took their pay in

cheeses. Some time later Trilda became the property of Murgan who eventually gave it to Shimrod. An old peasant couple tended the gardens and ordered the chambers during Shimrod's absences; they avoided the workroom as if demons stood waiting behind the doors, which was the conviction Shimrod had been at pains to fix into their minds. The creatures who in fact stood there, fangs glistening, black arms raised on high, while resembling demons, were merely harmless phantasms.

Arriving at Trilda, Shimrod found all in order. The housekeepers had maintained full cleanliness, with not so much as a

dead fly on the window-sills. The furniture glowed to the use of bee's-wax and patient rubbing; in the chests and presses the linens lay crisp and smelled fragrant with lavender.

Shimrod's only complaint was over-tidiness. He threw open doors and casements so that air from the meadow might banish the fust of stagnant days and silent nights, then went from room to room shifting this and moving that, to disturb the unrelenting exactitude imposed by his housekeepers.

Arriving in the kitchen, Shimrod kindled a fire and brewed a pot of tea, using horehound for heart, penny-royal for

savor and lemon verbena for zest, then took the tea into his day parlour.

Trilda seemed very quiet. From across the meadow came the chirrup chi chi chi of a lark. At the end of the song, the silence seemed more profound than ever.

Shimrod sipped the tea. At one time, so he remembered, solitude had been an adventure, to be enjoyed for its own sake. Since that time events had altered him; he had found within himself a capacity for love, and of late he had become accustomed to the merry company of Dhrun and Glyneth, and, more recently, to that of Aillas.

Melancthe? Shimrod made an ambiguous sound. In connection with Melancthe, the word 'love' would seem to have a most dubious application. Beauty compelled admiration and erotic yearning; such was its organic function. But never by itself could it command love: so Shimrod assured himself. Melancthe was a shell, empty inside. Melancthe was no more than a warm breathing symbol of great power, but no more than this.

Overintellectualization? Shimrod made a sound of disgust. Did she expect him not to think?

Shimrod continued to drink tea. The time had come when he must put aside his obsession and address himself to the

program defined by Murgon: work which might embroil him in more excitement than he had bargained for, so that he would think back upon this placid interlude with longing. Murgon had so warned him: "You will be impinging yourself upon Tamurello's notice! You will be rudely interrupting his work and arousing his anger! These are not trivial acts: make no mistake! He will find a means, crude or subtle, to retort, and you must be prepared for amazement!"

Shimrod put aside the tea, which no longer soothed him. He went to his workroom, dismissed the guardians and entered. The room was aptly named. Everywhere, work cried out for



sympathetic attention. The center table supported stuffs and articles confiscated from Tintzin Fyral: thaumaturgical equipment, materia magica, books and paraphernalia-all to be inspected, classified, then either retained or discarded.

First and most urgently, Shimrod must set out monitors to scrutinize Tamurello and his conduct, as required by Murgen. These devices, when they came to Tamurello's notice, as they inevitably must, would dissuade him from other bold and arrogant mischiefs: so went Murgen's theory, and Shimrod had no reason to fault it, save that it put him in the position of a goat staked out in the

jungle for the purpose of enticing a tiger. Murgan had waved aside Shimrod's misgivings. "Tamurello's bravado must be curbed, and this will be the effect of our program."

Shimrod had proposed another objection: "When he feels the scurch<sup>10</sup>, he will merely use new tactics, or a clever subterfuge."

"Still, he will be inhibited from truly grandiose ventures, and these are the efforts I fear the most."

"And meanwhile he will take pleasure in wreaking a multitude of small harms in such a way that they cannot be imputed

to him.”

“We will estimate his crimes and punish him accordingly, and soon Tamurello will be acclaimed the meekest of the meek!”

“Tamurello is not one to turn the other cheek,” grumbled Shimrod. “More likely he will send a sandestin<sup>11</sup> with a plague of stag-beetles for my bed.”

“Anything is possible,” Murgan agreed. “Were I you, I would maintain double vigilance. Dangers which can be imagined can be refuted!”

With Murgan’s dictum in mind, Shimrod

surrounded Trilda with a network of sensitive tendrils, to achieve at least a modicum of security. Then, once more in his workroom, he cleared the clutter from one of his work-tables and spread out a sheet of buff-colored parchment provided by Murgan.

The substance of the parchment merged into the oak, so that the table-top became a great map of the Elder Isles, with each of the domains tinted a different color.

At Faroli, Tamurello's manse, a point of blue light glittered, to indicate Tamurello's presence. Should Tamurello travel near or far, the blue light would trace his movements. Shimrod had solicited other lights from

Murgen, that he might know the movements of other folk; Murgen would hear nothing of this. “You must concentrate your attention upon Tamurello and nowhere else.”

Shimrod continued to argue. “We should use the instrument to its full scope. Assume that a red light marked your whereabouts. Assume further that one of your lady-loves seduced you into a dungeon, I could find you easily and release you from the cell, to your minimum inconvenience.”

“The contingency is remote.”

In such a fashion the map was arranged,

and, by the evidence of the blue light, Tamurello remained in residence at Faroli.

Days passed. Shimrod refined the techniques of his surveillance, using unobtrusive methods which Tamurello, if he so chose, could ignore and still maintain his dignity.

Tamurello, however, refused to tolerate the inspection gracefully, and attempted several artful mischiefs upon Shimrod, which were vitiated by Shimrod's protective system. Meanwhile Tamurello worked to blind Shimrod's optical wisps and shatter his listening shells with concentrations of sound.

Shimrod, warming to his task, introduced a whole new order of sensitive devices, to cause Tamurello a new set of vexations. Murgén's strategy, to monopolize Tamurello's energies with trivial annoyances, seemed generally to be successful.

The lunar month approached the night of the waning half-moon, and Shimrod's thoughts irresistibly went to the white villa beside the ocean. For the briefest of moments he contemplated a second visit by midnight to the rocky ledge which thrust into the ocean; as quickly as the idea came it went, and once again Shimrod was left with unwelcome images and the haunting fragrance of

violets.

Shimrod tried to exorcise the visions:  
“Go! Away! Depart! Dissolve into the  
void, and never return to disturb me!  
Were it not absurd, I might think you  
another of Tamurello’s tricks, as he does  
to me what I try to do to him!”

On the night itself, Shimrod became  
restless, and went out to observe the  
moon. The meadow was quiet; nothing  
could be heard but crickets and a few far  
frogs. Shimrod wandered across the  
meadow to the old dock on Lally Water,  
where the moon already had started its  
decline down the sky. The water was  
calm and dark; when Shimrod threw a



pebble, the expanding ripples gleamed silver. ... A watch-wisp floating over his head issued a sudden warning: “Someone stands near; magic has come and gone!”

Shimrod turned and, not altogether to his surprise, discovered by the shore a slight figure in a white gown and a black cloak: Melanthe. She stood looking up at the moon and seemed not to see him.

Shimrod, turning away, paid her no heed.

She came down the dock and stood beside him. “You do not seem surprised to find me here?”

“I only wonder how Tamurello could induce you to come.”

“He found no difficulty; in fact, I came of my own volition.”

“Strange! Tonight you were to sing with your friends on the rocks.”

“I decided to go there no more.”

“How so?”

“It is simple enough. I had a choice: to live or to die. I chose to live, which brought me to new choices. Should I continue as an outcast and sing on the rocks, or should I simulate the ways of

the human race? I decided to change.”

“You do not regard yourself as human?”

Melancthe said softly: “Tamurello has informed me that I am a neutral intelligence of no great vigor in a female mask.” She looked up into Shimrod’s face. “What do you think?”

“I think that Tamurello listens and smiles. Wisp: look sharp, high and low: what listens and what watches?”

“I apprehend nothing.”

Shimrod gave a dubious grunt. “And what were Tamurello’s instructions to

you?”

“He said that humanity in the main was crass, stupid, boorish and vulgar, and that I could learn at least this much from you.”

“Some other time. Now, Melancthe, I will bid you good night.”

“Wait, Shimrod! You told me that I was beautiful, and you took pains to kiss me. Tonight I have come to Trilda and you are the one who now backs away. That is a curious contradiction.”

“Not at all. I am taken aback, and cautious. Tamurello’s motives are clear

enough, but yours are in doubt. I believe that you exaggerate my crassness and stupidity. And now, Melancthe, if you will excuse me—”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to Trilda; where else?”

“And you will leave me alone in the dark?”

“You have been alone in the dark before.”

“We will go to Trilda together, since I have no other place to go. And, as I have already mentioned, I came here of my

own volition.”

“You show little overt warmth. It is more as if you had steeled yourself to a great challenge.”

“It is a new experience for me.”

With an effort Shimrod controlled his voice. “I might have welcomed you more gladly had you not told your maid to bar the door in my face. When one is judging the disposition of another, this sort of act would seem a significant straw in the wind.”

“Possibly so, but the inference might be wrong. Remember, you had intruded into

my life and had troubled my mind with your persuasions. At length I was swayed and now I am here, at your behest.”

“At Tamurello’s behest.”

Melancthe smiled. “I am I and you are you. How does Tamurello concern us, one way or another?”

“Is your memory so short? I have reason for concern.”

Melancthe looked off across the water. “He gave no orders. He said that you were here at Trilda making a nuisance of yourself. He said that if not for Murgén,

he would have long since sent you riding to the far side of the moon on a saw-horse. He said he would be pleased if I beguiled and besotted you until your eyes looked like boiled eggs and you fell asleep at breakfast with your face in the porridge. He said that you had a low-order mind and could deal with no more than one thought at a time, and that if I were at Trilda you would completely forget your meddling, to his great satisfaction, and now you know all of it.”

“Just as well.” Shimrod looked moodily out over the water. “I wonder what calumnies another five minutes might have brought.”



Melancthe moved a step back. “Well then, here I am. What is it to be? Shall I go away? Consult the factions of your brain, and perhaps you will find a consensus.”

“I have already decided,” said Shimrod. “You shall come to Trilda.” And Shimrod, with grim emphasis, added: “There we shall discover who most notably distracts whom, and every morning Tamurello will receive a cheerful greeting... . Notice the waning moon; already it declines into the west. Time that we returned to Trilda.”

The two went silently back along the lane, and as they walked a new and

disturbing possibility entered Shimrod's mind: might this creature beside him which used the name Melancthe be a guise for another, of a different sort, which at some delicate moment might reveal itself in its true form, and so punish Shimrod for his impudent surveillance?

The concept was not on its face improbable. Luckily, the trick could readily be detected.

Once in the parlour at Trilda, Shimrod took Melancthe's cloak and poured two goblets of pomegranate wine. "The flavor, like yourself, is at once sweet and tart, haunting, mysterious and by no

means obvious... . Come! I will show you around Trilda.”

Shimrod first took her into the dining saloon (“The oak is cut from a tree which grew on this very site.”), across the formal parlour (“Notice the tapestries in the cartouches; they were woven in ancient Parthia.”), then into the workroom. Shimrod immediately went to look at his map. The blue point of light glittered from the site of Faroli, far to the north in Dahaut: so much for one of his suspicions, that the woman at his side might even be a guise of the epicene Tamurello; this was clearly not the case.

Melancthe looked here and there without

great interest.

Shimrod described two or three pieces of his paraphernalia, then took her before a tall mirror, which reflected her image in clear detail, and another of Shimrod's misgivings was put to rest. Had she been a succuba or a harpy, the creature's true image would have reflected from the mirror.

Melanthe studied the glass with absorbed interest. Shimrod said: "The mirror is of magic. You see reflected the person you think yourself to be. Or you may say: 'Mirror, show me as I appear to Shimrod!' or, 'Mirror, show me as I appear to Tamurello!' and you will see

these versions of yourself.”

Melancthe moved away without undertaking the trials Shimrod had suggested. Shimrod surveyed the mirror from the side. “I could easily confront the mirror and say: ‘Mirror, show me as I appear to Melancthe!’ but, in all candor, I lack the courage.”

“Let us leave this room,” said Melancthe. “It reeks of the brain.”

The two returned to the small parlour, where Shimrod brought fire to the hearth, then turned to inspect Melancthe.

She spoke in her soft voice: “You are

pensive. Why is this?”

Shimrod stood looking down into the flames. “I find myself with a dilemma. Do you care to hear it?”

“I will listen, certainly.”

“At Ys, only a few weeks ago, Shimrod visited Melanthe, to renew their acquaintance and perhaps to discover some mutuality of interest which might enhance their lives. In the end Melanthe scornfully barred the door to him.

“Tonight Shimrod strolls beside Lally Water, watching the moon-set. Melanthe appears, and now, instead of

Shimrod pursuing Melancthe, it is Melancthe who pursues Shimrod, that she may beguile and befuddle him in his manse Trilda, that he may desist from molesting her friend Tamurello.

“With perhaps disingenuous frankness she reports Tamurello’s unflattering opinion of Shimrod, so that now Shimrod must throw self-esteem to the winds if he obeys his impulses and succumbs to Melancthe’s allurements. If he proves steadfast and expels Melancthe from Trilda with the rebuke she deserves, he shows himself to be pompous, inflexible and foolish.

“His dilemma, then, is not whether, or

how, or if, to retain pride, dignity and self-respect, but in which direction to cast them aside.”

Melancthe asked: “How long do you intend to ponder? I have no self-esteem whatever, and I can make up my mind instantly, according to my inclinations.”

“Perhaps that is the best wisdom, after all,” said Shimrod. “My character is intensely strong, and my will is like iron; still, I see no reason to demonstrate their strength needlessly.”

Melancthe said: “The fire blazes hot, and the room is warm. Shimrod, help me from my cloak.”



Shimrod stepped close, parted the clasp at her neck, and took her cloak; in some way her gown also fell to the floor, so that she stood nude in the firelight.

Shimrod thought that never had he seen a sight so beautiful. He embraced her and her body first stiffened, then went flexible.

The fire had burned low. Melancthe said in a husky voice: “Shimrod, I am frightened.”

“How so?”

“When I looked into the mirror, I saw nothing.”

## VI

THE DAYS GLIDED BY, easy and quiet, without untoward incident to mark one day from the next. Shimrod occasionally thought that Melanthe attempted to tease and provoke him, but he maintained at all times a manner of imperturbable composure, and in the main all went smoothly. Melanthe seemed at least passively content, and was at all times accessible, or even more than accessible, to Shimrod's erotic inclinations. With dour amusement Shimrod recalled events of the past: her distraught conduct as she walked through his dreams; her boredom during his

visits to her villa; her barring of the door against him-and now! His most farfetched amorous fantasies had become real!

Why? The question constantly came to perplex him. Somewhere there was mystery. Shimrod could not understand how Tamurello profited from the arrangement; according to the blue glint, he never strayed from Faroli.

Melancthe herself volunteered no information, and pride prevented Shimrod from putting aside his pose of urbane equanimity and placing sharp questions.

Now and then, during the course of conversation, Shimrod made an idle inquiry or two, but Melancthe commonly returned only a blank stare, or sometimes an evasion or at worst accused him of overintellectualization. “When something needs to be done I do it! When my nose itches, I scratch it, without an agonizing analysis of the situation.”

“Scratch at will, so long as it pleases you,” said Shimrod in a voice of austere courtesy.

As time passed, the novelty of Melancthe’s presence diminished, but not so her amorousness, which, perhaps

through boredom, actually increased until it quite exceeded Shimrod's competence, causing him guilt and sheepishness. Remedies were available, had he chosen to use them: for instance, an elixir known as "The Bear", in jocular reference to the constellation Ursa Major, always aloft by night and by day. Shimrod also knew of a magical spell which worked to the same effect, known popularly as "The Phoenix".

Shimrod refused to consider such adjuncts, for several reasons. First, Melancthe already took up more of his time than he cared to reckon, and absorbed a large fraction of his energies in the process, leaving him often in a

state of lassitude, so that his surveillance over Tamurello was at times desultory. Secondly-and here was a contingency which Shimrod could never have anticipated-the unadorned copulations, lacking humour, sympathy and grace, gradually came to lose much of their charm. Finally, a suspicion occasionally seeped into Shimrod's mind that Melancthe found him wanting, in quality as well as quantity. Shimrod at all times pridefully dismissed the idea; what had sufficed for his other partners in dalliance must do equally well for Melancthe.

A month passed and another. Each morning, after one or more erotic

episodes, Shimrod and Melancthe took a leisurely breakfast of porridge with cream and fresh red currants, or perhaps griddlecakes, butter, cherry conserve or honey, with ham, watercress and boiled eggs, and usually either a half-dozen broiled quail or a brace of fresh trout, or poached salmon in dill sauce, along with new bread, fresh milk and berries. A pair of pale falloys<sup>12</sup> prepared and served the meal, and cleared away the soiled plates, cups and trenchers.

After breakfast Shimrod might take himself to his workroom, though more often he dozed for an hour or two on the couch, while Melancthe wandered about the meadow. Sometimes she sat in the

garden plucking the strings of a lute, contriving sounds in which Shimrod discovered no pattern but which nonetheless seemed to please Melanthe.

After two months Shimrod found her moods as enigmatic as on the day of her arrival. He fell into the habit of squinting at her sidelong, in wonder and speculation. The mannerism evidently vexed her, so that one morning she gave a sudden grimace and demanded: "You watch me as a bird watches an insect: why do you do so?"

Shimrod finally gathered his wits and said: "For the most part I watch you out of sheer pleasure! You are certainly the



most beautiful creature alive!”

Melanthe muttered, as much to herself as to Shimrod: “Am I alive? I may not even be real.”

Shimrod responded in that whimsical manner which also annoyed Melanthe, though not as much as an alternative style of logical exposition: “You are alive; otherwise you would be dead and I would be a necrophile. This is not so; hence you are alive. If you were not real, your clothes-” Melanthe now wore pale buff peasant breeches and a peasant smock “-would find no support and would fall into a heap on the ground. Are you satisfied?”

“Then why did not the mirror show my image?”

“Have you looked into it recently?”

“No. I dread what I might see. Or might not see.”

“The mirror gives you back your self-assessment. You have no personal image because Tamurello has denied it to you, to keep you subservient. That, at least, is my guess. Since you refuse to confide in me, I cannot help you.”

Melancthe looked away across the meadow, and caught unawares, perhaps said more than she wanted: “The advice

of a man would only weaken me.”

Shimrod frowned. “Why should that be?”

“Because that is how things are.”

Shimrod said nothing and presently Melancthe cried out: “You are looking at me again!”

“Yes. In wonder. But now at last I am beginning to guess what you will not tell me, and I wonder not so much any more; in fact I think I know.”

“Do you ever do aught but think? You keep the whole world under your

forehead: a queer dead Shimrod-shaped illusion! But what do you truly know?"

"For convenience, let us restrict our remarks to your presence at Trilda. Tamurello sent you here to distract me. This is so clear as to be rudimentary. Am I wrong?"

"You would never believe otherwise, no matter what I told you."

"You are clever. Of course I am wrong. You evade my question in order to fool me. Why should I be surprised? You have fooled me before; now I know you well."

“You know me by not so much as an inkling! By not even the inkling of an inkling! You think, you ponder, even while we lie engaged I hear your thoughts clicking together!”

Astonished by Melancthe’s vehemence, Shimrod could only say: “Nevertheless, I understand you at last!”

“You are a prodigy of pure reason.”

“Your ideas are absolutely wrong! It is proper that you should realize your error. I have not the heart to tell you the whole of it, especially now, while you are angry. You have won the erotic war; the Female Principle has defeated the

Male! You are welcome to the victory; it is empty. I will say no more.”

“No!” cried Melanthe. “You have gone too far; you must say more!”

Shimrod shrugged. “You decided to sing no longer with the outcasts; you chose to join the human society, but here, willy-nilly, you were forced to obey the function Desmei imprinted upon you. I had come to your villa and there aroused your hostility. I suspect that it was a queer bittersweet emotion: you both liked and disliked me. In any event I became your first antagonist. Did you defeat me? Think as you like. And now I will say no more, except only this: you

can tolerate Tamurello because he is not truly masculine; hence he is not an antagonist.” Shimrod rose to his feet. “Excuse me; I have neglected much of late, and I must see to my duties.”

Shimrod went to his workroom. The tables had been ordered; again the room was a pleasant place in which to work, though Shimrod had done precious little of this during the last two months.

Today his first business concerned the wizard Baibalides, who lived in a house of black rock on Lamneth Isle, a hundred yards off the coast of Wysrod.

Shimrod opened a cabinet and extracted

a case from which he took a mask representing Baibalides. Next he brought out a skull on a pedestal and arranged the mask in place over the skull.

Instantly the mask seemed to come alive. The eyes blinked; the mouth opened to allow a tongue to moisten the lips.

Shimrod called: "Baibalides, can you hear me? It is Shimrod who speaks."

The mouth of the mask responded using Baibalides' voice. "Shimrod, I hear you. What is your business with me?"

"I have here an article which I took from Tintzin Fyral. It is an ivory tube carved on one side with odd runes and on the other with characters spelling out your



name. I wonder what might be the purpose of the tube, and whether you claim it as your property, or whether it might have been a gift, either to Tamurello or to Faude Carfilhiot.”

Baibalides answered: “I know the tube well: it is Gantwin’s Millenial Spectator; it depicts events of the last thousand years anywhere within its purview. I lost it at wager to Tamurello, who evidently gave it to Carfilhiot. If you have no need for it, I will gladly resume ownership. It is invaluable when one wishes to locate buried treasure or to learn the deeds of dead heroes, or, on a more practical basis, to determine paternity. As I recall, the activating spell

is of three resonances and a quaver.”

“The article is once more yours,” said Shimrod. “If ever I require its use, perhaps you will allow me this favor.”

“With pleasure!” said Baibalides heartily. “I celebrate the return of this article with special satisfaction since I believe that Tamurello cheated me during the course of the wager.”

“Not impossible,” said Shimrod. “Tamurello is a man of peculiar predilections. From sheer perversity, he prefers evil to good. Someday he will press Murgén too far.”

“That is my own opinion. Only last week I attended a conclave on Mount Khambaste in Ethiopia, where Tamurello was already in residence. During the important business he offended a Circassian witch who began to corrode Tamurello with Blue Ruin, and Tamurello was forced to make concessions, though later he cursed the witch with footlong toenails, so that now and forever she must wear special boots.”

Shimrod’s attention had been caught. “Last week, you say? And where did Tamurello go after leaving the conclave?”

“Perhaps he returned to Faroli; I am not sure.”

“It is no great matter. I will see that you receive your tube in short order.”

“Shimrod, I thank you!”

The mask lost its vitality. Shimrod replaced both mask and skull in the cabinet. He went to his map and inspected the blue point of light which so definitely had placed Tamurello in residence at Faroli over the previous two months.

Peering close, Shimrod discovered the source of the error. A small section of

adhesive membrane had been applied to the map, immobilizing the blue glint in place.

Shimrod, turning slowly away from the map, examined each of the other instruments which, so he believed, kept a vigilant watch upon all phases of Tamurello's activities. Each, by one means or another, had been rendered useless, in such a way that a casual inspection might not reveal the failure.

Shimrod aroused Facque, the sandestin which, disguised as a gargoyle carved into the facing above the fireplace, guarded the workroom against intruders. "Facque, are you asleep?"

“Naturally not.”

“Why have you not kept diligent watch?”

“If you please, I cannot properly answer negative questions. There are numberless acts which I have not performed; we could confer here forever while I detailed the deeds I have not done.”

Patiently Shimrod asked: “Did you, then, keep vigilant watch over the workroom?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Why did you not warn me of

intruders?”

Facque made another peevish protest:  
“Must you again and again ask questions  
presuming non-existent facts?”

“Did you notice intruders, or better: who  
has during the past two months entered  
the workroom?”

“You, Murgén, and the female who has  
been sent here to bemuse and befuddle  
you.”

“Has the woman come in alone, while I  
was not present?”

“On several occasions.”

“Did she tamper with my map and my instruments?”

“She stilled the light in place, and interfered with other devices.”

“Did she do anything else?”

“She made marks with a stylus in your Book of Logotypes.”

Shimrod gave a startled exclamation.

“Small wonder that my magic has lately been so flat! What more?”

“Nothing of consequence.”

Shimrod removed the immobilizing film



from the map; instantly the blue glint, as if to relieve pent pressures, darted in all directions back and forth, hither and yon, finally to settle once again upon the site of Faroli.

Shimrod addressed himself to his instruments, and after some difficulty restored their functions.

Once again he called out to Facque:  
“Awake!”

“I am awake. I never sleep.”

“Has Tamurello, or anyone else, installed instruments of surveillance, or any other function, here at Trilda?”

“Yes. The woman may fairly be included into that category. Secondly, Tamurello has commissioned me to report upon your activities, and lacking instructions to the contrary, I have obliged him. Thirdly, Tamurello has attempted to use mayflies for purposes of espionage, but without any great success.”

“Facque, I hereby instruct you, definitely and without qualification, to desist from reporting information of any sort to anyone save Murgan or myself: especially and specifically to Tamurello, or to any of his agents or instruments, or to the air at large, on the theory that it might by some means be

collected and directed to the attention of Tamurello.”

Facque said: “I am pleased that you have clarified this point. In short, Tamurello is not to receive information of any kind.”

“Exactly so, and this includes both positive and negative information, or the use of coded silences, or the manipulation of any device, or signal, or musical selection from which Tamurello could elicit information. You must neither initiate, nor make response, in any wise whatever, and I include all types and permutations of communication I have overlooked.

“At last I understand your requirements,” said Facque. “All is now in order.”

“Not quite,” said Shimrod. “I must decide how to deal with Melancthe.”

“Spend no great effort in this regard,” advised Facque. “It would be time wasted.”

“How so?”

“You will find that the woman has left the premises.” Shimrod rushed from the workroom, and looked everywhere, but Melancthe was nowhere to be seen, and Shimrod somberly returned to his workroom.

## VII

TAMURELLO SELDOM APPEARED in his natural semblance, preferring an exotic guise for a variety of reasons, not the least of the which was sheer caprice.

Today, stepping out on a balcony above the octagonal garden court at Faroli, he was a frail and ascetic youth, somewhat languid, pale as new milk, with a coriolus of orangered hair, the strands so fine and luminous as to be invisible. A thin nose, thin lips and blazing blue eyes suggested spiritual exaltation, as Tamurello intended.

Tamurello came slowly down a curving

sweep of black glass steps to the courtyard. At the foot of the staircase he halted, then came slowly forward and finally, turning his head, chose to take notice of Melanthe, who stood to the side in the shade of a flowering mimosa tree.

The boy-man approached Melanthe, and it was she who seemed the more earthy and dank. She watched him with a still face; his ethereal but definite masculinity was a posture with which she could feel no possible sympathy.

Tamurello, halting, looked her up and down, then raised an indolent finger and turned away. "Come."

Melancthe followed him into a parlour and seated herself stiffly at the center of a sofa. From her point of view, Tamurello's guises were little more than clues to his mood. This boy-man puzzled rather than annoyed Melancthe. On the whole she cared not a pin as to how he showed himself, and now she put Tamurello's peculiar guise and its possible significance to the side of her mind. Other affairs were more important.

Tamurello again looked her up and down. "You seem none the worse for wear."

"Your tasks have been fulfilled."

“Even over-fulfilled! Ha hum, be it so! Now it seems that in my turn I must address myself to your concerns.

“As I recall, you are troubled because you cannot mesh yourself comfortably into the ways of the world. This is a legitimate source of dissatisfaction. You therefore want me to make changes in the world or, failing this, in you.” The boy-man’s lips curved in a thin smile, and Melanthe thought that never before had Tamurello affected so acrid a guise.

Melanthe said, simply: “You told me that my mind works at discord to the minds of other persons.”



“So I did. Notably with persons of the masculine gender. This is Desmei’s attempted revenge upon the cosmos, and particularly that segment with external genital organs. What a joke! It is only such innocents as poor Shimrod who must bear the brunt of Desmei’s rage.”

“In that case, remove her curse from my soul.”

The boy-man studied Melancthe with grave attention. He said at last: “I fear that you crave the impossible.”

“But you assured me-”

The boy-man held up his hand. “In all

candor, I lack the skill, nor could Murgan himself do better.”

Melancthe’s beautiful mouth drooped at the comers. “Is not your magic useful in such a case?”

The orange-haired boy-man spoke with vivacity: “It is all very well to ordain tasks by magic, but some intelligent or skillful agency must ultimately do the specified work. In such remedial work as this no entity, be it man, sandestin, halfling, demon, or other creature of controllable power, understands all the intricacies. Therefore, it cannot be done on the instant.”

“Still, this was your undertaking.”

“I stated that I would do my best and so I shall. Listen, and I will describe your problems. Attend me carefully; the subject is dense.”

“I am listening.”

“Each mind is a composite of several phases in super-imposition. The first is aware, and is consciousness. The others are no less active but work for the most part in obscurity and away from the light of knowledgeable attention.

“Each phase uses its own tools. The first, or overt, phase of the mind

purports to use the faculties of logic, curiosity, the differentiation of aptness from absurdity, with a corollary known as ‘humour,’ and a certain projective kind of sympathy, known as ‘justice.’

“The second and third and other phases are concerned with emotions, reflexes, and work of the body.

“Your first phase would seem to be deficient. The second phase, the agent of emotional interpretations, with great travail and inconvenience tries to fulfill this function. Here would seem to be the nature of your debility. The remedy is to strengthen the first phase, by a regimen of usage and training.”

Melancthe frowned in puzzlement. “How would I train?”

“Two methods suggest themselves. I can alter your guise to that of an infant and introduce you into a noble family where you can learn by ordinary processes.”

“Would I retain my memory?”

“That is at your option.”

Melancthe pursed her lips. “I do not want to be an infant.”

“Then you must apply yourself to learning, in the fashion of a student: through books and study and discipline,

and so you will learn to think with logic, rather than to brood in terms of emotion.”

Melancthe muttered: “It would seem a horror of tedium. To study, to pore over books, to think, to intellectualize- these are the habits I derided in Shimrod.”

The boy-man surveyed her with no great interest. “Make your decision.”

“If I were forced to study from books, I would learn nothing and go mad in the bargain. Can you not collect a sufficiency of wisdom and experience and humour and sympathy into a node and imprint it upon the empty place in

my brain?”

“No!” The boy-man responded so sharply that Melancthe wondered if he told all the truth he knew. “Make your decision!”

“I will return to Ys, and consider.”

Tamurello instantly spoke a set of syllables, as if he had been waiting for nothing more. Melancthe was whirled aloft and carried high through clouds and dazzling sunlight. She glimpsed the ocean and the horizon and then felt the soft sand of the beach under her feet.

Melancthe dropped to sit in the warm

sand, with arms clasped around her knees. To the south the armies of King Aillas had departed; the beach lay empty all the way to the estuary. She watched the play of the waves. Surging and churning the surf advanced upon her in a gush of white foam

Melancthe sat an hour, then, rising to her feet, she shook the sand from her clothes and entered her quiet villa.



# Chapter 7

## I

KING AILLAS HAD MOVED THE HEADQUARTERS of his army to Doun Darric, a ruined village on the river Malheu, only three miles south of Sir Helwig's castle Stronson, in the very heart of South Ulfland. Doun Darric had been one of the first South Ulf villages to be despoiled by the Ska, and only tumblers of stone and rubble marked the sites of the old cottages.

The advantages of Doun Darric as army headquarters were many. The troops no

longer enjoyed access to the taverns along the docks at Ys; there were no quarrels with men of the town, and the maidens of Ys were again free to visit the market without a surfeit of attention from gallant young soldiers. Even more important, the troops were close upon the high moors, where the weight of their presence was demonstrable to folk of the area.

Aillas had never dared hope that instant tranquillity, like a soft and healing balm, would settle over the mountains and moors of South Ulfland. Vendetta and clan warfare were intrinsic to the Ulfish soul. The king might issue proclamations by the dozen, but unless he cowed,

bribed or otherwise persuaded the barons to preserve his laws, the land must remain wild.

The barons of the western slopes and the lower moors for the most part supported Aillas; they were intimately acquainted with the Ska. Their counterparts of the higher regions, in some cases little better than bandit chieftains, were not only the most jealous of their independence but were also the most rancorous proponents of the conduct which Aillas had vowed to obliterate. With the army at Doun Darric, the royal threats had suddenly taken on real import.

Almost immediately Aillas decided to

make Doun Darric a permanent base. From everywhere across the land came masons and carpenters, to build suitable appurtenances. Meanwhile, old Doun Darric began to be resurrected: first, in temporary style, by the workmen themselves, and then to a plan more or less casually drawn up by Sir Tristano, as one evening he exercised his fancy over a bottle of wine. He ordained a market square alongside the river with shops and inns around the periphery, broad streets with sewers after the Troice system, and cottages of good quality, each with its own garden. Aillas, taking note of Sir Tristano's sketches, saw every reason why they should be realized, including

augmentation of the royal prestige.

Aillas disliked Oaldes, the ramshackle and generally slovenly seat of the former Kings, and Ys was unthinkable as the capital of South Ulfland. Aillas therefore decreed Doun Darric his capital, and Sir Tristano added to his plans a small if gracious royal residence overlooking the river Malheu on one side and the square on the other. Sir Tristano now thought even farther into the future, and set aside a tract across the river for the construction of more pretentious residences by a newly prosperous upper class, which might choose to make their homes in the new town. The builders: carpenters, masons, plasterers, roofers,

glaziers, painters and paint-mixers, timber-cutters and quarrymen-all rejoiced to hear the news; their own prosperity was assured for the foreseeable future.

The lands in the neighborhood of Doun Darric for the most part had reverted to the wild. Aillas set aside large tracts for eventual distribution to his veterans, in accordance with his promises. Other areas Sir Maloof sold at low and long-term prices to those landless persons who would restore the land to cultivation.

Such tangible evidences of permanency tended to support the authority of the

king, who no longer could be labelled a foreign adventurer, intent on wringing South Ulfland dry of what little wealth remained to it. Each day brought new platoons of both volunteers and conscripts to Doun Darric from every part of the land, and from North Ulfland as well: strong young men of great gallantry, many of noble lineage who saw in the army their only hope for glory and advancement. These newcomers were uniformly taut with pride and courage, and often displayed the concomitant qualities of obstinacy and truculence. They conducted their lives by a pair of standard rules: first, one must be constantly prepared to fight; second, in combat, there was no

gracious defeat; the loser surrendered, fled or died, each outcome equally hateful.

Aillas had learned a few of the intricacies and interactions of the highland feuds. Plainly, many of his new troops would find themselves working in consort with their old enemies, which would seem an invitation to bloodletting. On the other hand, to reckon upon the animosities and to segregate hostile factions seemed to Aillas the worst of all solutions, since it would give the feuds official recognition. The new recruits were notified only that ancient quarrels had no place in the king's army, and must be forgotten, after which the



topic received no more attention, and the soldiers were billeted without reference to their past. Typically, the erstwhile enemies, now wearing the same uniforms, after a brief period of jutting jaws, curled lips, and sidelong glances, accommodated themselves to circumstances for lack of practical alternative.

In view of Ulf self-assurance and obstinacy, the first stages of training went slowly. The Troice officers dealt patiently and philosophically with the problem. By almost imperceptible increments, the strong-minded mountain lads came to understand what was expected of them and to wear their

uniforms with ease, and finally they themselves were instructing new recruits with attitudes of indulgent contempt for their awkwardness.

Meanwhile, along the upper moors and into the high glens, a tense quiet prevailed-the quiet not of restful ease, but the quiet of whispers and listening in the dark and held breath: an unnatural condition, affecting the landscape itself, as if the very mountains and crags and gorse and pine forests watched and waited for the first contravention of royal law.

Aillas sent Sir Tristano forth with a suitable escort to test the mood of the far

places, and also to solicit further news of the self-proclaimed Daut knight Sir Shalles. Sir Tristano returned to report that he had received correct if somewhat cool hospitality; that the barons were disbanding their armed companies with calculated slowness; and that each house had a litany of wrongs to recite against its foes. As for Sir Shalles, he had not been idle, and appeared here and there to disseminate a wonderful variety of rumors. Sir Shalles, according to best report, was a stocky gentleman of intelligence and credibility, even though a number of his claims were either inherently ridiculous or self-contradictory; his audience could believe what it wanted to believe. He

stated that Aillas and the Ska had formed a secret alliance; that ultimately the Ulf barons would find themselves fighting for the Ska. Sir Shalles reported that Aillas was subject to foaming fits, and that his sexual tastes were both freakish and rank. Sir Shalles also had it on the best authority that after King Aillas rendered the barons defenseless, he intended to impose a crushing burden of taxes upon them, and confiscate their lands when they could not pay.

“Is there more?” Aillas asked when Sir Tristano had stopped for breath.

“Much more! It is widely known that you are already sending shiploads of Ulf

maidens back to Troicinet for use in the waterfront stews.”

Aillas chuckled. “What about my worship of Hoonch the dog-god? And the fact that I poisoned Oriante so as to become King of South Ulfland?”

“Neither of those, yet.”

“We must strike back at this energetic Sir Shalles.” Aillas thought a moment.

“Announce everywhere that I am anxious to meet Sir Shalles, that I will pay him twice as much as King Casmir does to roam the back counties of Lyonesse spreading tales about King Casmir. Do not yourself go; send messengers with

the notice.”

“Excellent!” declared Sir Tristano. “It shall be done. Now: another matter. Have you heard the name “rorqual1?”

Aillas reflected. “I think not. Who is he?”

“From what I can gather he is a Ska renegade, who became a bandit and took to the hills. Recently, I was told, he went to ply his trade in Lyonesse, but now he is back, in a secret keep close on the border between the Ulflands. There he has recruited a band of human brutes, and raids into South Ulfland. He has let it be known that he will attack, waylay,

besiege and destroy any baron who obeys your rule; for this reason, those barons situated near the North Ulfland frontier are more than normally reluctant to fly your flag. All the while Torqual takes sanctuary in North Ulfland where you cannot go, at risk of arousing the Ska.”

“A pretty problem,” muttered Aillas.  
“Have you a solution?”

“Nothing practical. You cannot fortify the border. You cannot usefully garrison all the castles. A sortie into North Ulfland could only amuse Torqual.”

“These are my own thoughts. Still, if I

cannot protect my subjects, they will not think me their king.”

“It is a problem without a solution,” said Sir Tristano. “Is that opinion helpful?”

“Eventually Torqual will die of old age,” said Aillas. “That might be my best hope.”

## II

TENSIONS PERSISTED ALONG THE UPPER MOORS. With simple conviction the Ulf barons asserted the changeless reality of the old feuds; they were neither forgotten nor forgiven. Passions were dissembled; retaliations



were held in abeyance, while all waited to discover who first would defy the young king, and, with even more interest, how Aillas would respond to the challenge.

The tension broke suddenly, with a majestic doomsday inevitability to the circumstances.

The party at offense was none other than doughty Sir Hune of Three Pines House. In full and ponderous defiance of the law, he waylaid Sir Dostoy of Stoygaw Keep when Sir Dostoy ventured out on the moors for a morning's sport with his hawks. One of Sir Dostoy's sons died in the skirmish; another fled with wounds.

Sir Dostoy himself was trussed and flung over the back of a horse like a sack of meal. His captors carried him up the slope of Molk Mountain to Goatskull Gap, down and across Blacken Moor, through Kaugh Forest and so across Lammon's Meadow to Three Pines House. There, Sir Hune made good his threat and nailed Sir Dostoy high on the door of the hay barn, after which Sir Hune called for his supper and ate with gusto while squires of the house used Sir Dostoy as a target for their birding arrows.

Aillas learned of the deed when the wounded second son rode reeling into Doun Darric. He was well prepared.

Almost before Sir Dostoy's corpse was cold a strike-force of four hundred men, large enough to discourage intervention by Sir Hune's clan-fellows, yet not so large as to be cumbersome, was on its way to Three Pines House: up Malheu Valley with its train of wagons rumbling at best speed in the rear; along the Tin Mine Road with Molk Mountain looming into the clouds still to the east, then below Kaugh Forest and out upon Lammon's Meadow.

A half-mile to the east, on a hummock of rock, stood Three Pines House behind its fortifications.

Sir Hune received news of the royal

reaction by messenger, and was taken aback somewhat by the swiftness of response. He admitted as much to Thrumbo, his Chief Archer. “Ha ha! He moves hard and he moves fast! Well then, what of that? We will hold a parley. I will declare my error, and vow to mend my ways; then we will spit a bullock and swallow a tun of good wine, and all will be well; let the Stoygaw curs yelp as they may.”

Such was Sir Hune’s first thought. Then, becoming uneasy, he wrote out a letter and dispatched it in haste to the houses of his clansmen:

Bring you and ail your true men to Three

Pines, where we must set this foreign king into skreeking defeat! Come at once; I charge you by the donas of biood and the tokens of the dan.

Response to the letter was scant; only a few dozen men answered the call to war, and these lacked all zest. Sir Hune was advised a dozen times to take horse and flee over the hills into Dahaut, but by the time he had reached the same decision, the royal army had arrived at Three Pines House, and instantly placed it under investment.

Sir Hune had pulled up his gate and waited glumly for the summons to parley. He waited in vain, while with

sinister efficiency the Troice contingents made their preparations. A pair of heavy mangonels was assembled; at once they began to lob great boulders up, over and down upon the roofs of the structures within the stone walls.

Sir Hune was dumbfounded and outraged; where was the call to parley he had so confidently expected? And he liked even less the sight of the gibbet which was being erected somewhat to the side. It was strong and high, and well-braced, as if prepared for much heavy work.

The barrage continued all night long. As the sun sent red rays of dawn along the

misty fell, bales of straw impregnated with hot pitch and fish oil were set afire and lofted after the stones, that they might ignite broken woodwork and stores. Almost at once red flames and coils of black smoke rose above the doomed fabric of Three Pines House.

From within came hoarse calls of rage and horror; this was not the way affairs were meant to go! Here was sheer coldblooded obliteration of Sir Hune and Three Pines in totality, and all for so trifling an offense!

Sir Hune prepared for what must now be done: a hopeless and desperate attempt to flee. The gates fell open: out galloped

the warriors in an effort to break through the lines and win free across the moors. Arrows felled their horses. Some of the warriors leaped erect and fought with swords until they too were shot dead by the Troice archers; others were captured as they lay stunned in the bracken, and among these was Sir Hune. His arms were bound; a rope was tied around his neck and he was dragged stumbling to the gibbet.

Aillas stood at a distance of twenty yards. For the briefest of moments the two looked eye to eye, then Sir Hune was hoisted high.

The survivors of the battle were brought



to Aillas for judgment. Two were barons in their own right, and six more were knights; these eight were considered rebels, as was Sir Hune, and they too went to the gibbet.

The remaining prisoners, some fifty men, stood haggard and woebegone, waiting their turn. Aillas went to inspect them. He spoke: "In point of law you, like your leaders, are rebels. Probably you deserve hanging. However, I deplore the waste of strong men, who should be supporting the cause of their country rather than working to defeat it.

"I offer each of you an option. You may be hanged at this moment, or you may

enlist in the king's army, to serve him with full loyalty. Choose! Those who wish to be hanged, let them step yonder to the gibbet.”

There were a few uneasy mutters, a shifting of feet, and walleyed glances toward the gibbet, but no one moved. “What? There are none for the gibbet? Then let those who wish to enlist in the royal army move yonder to the wagons, and place themselves under the command of the sergeant.”

Sheepishly the erstwhile defenders of Three Pines House took themselves to the wagons.

The women and children of the household stood desolately by the walls of the still-smouldering castle. Aillas instructed Sir Pirmence: “Go now and console the women; advise them to find places with their kin; if need be give them assistance. Your tactfulness and perception should be invaluable. Sir Tristano, make sure that no survivors remain within the castle, whether invalids or persons whom we might wish to know better, such as Sir Shalles of Dahaut. Sir Maloof, where are you? Here is scope for your own rare talents! Speak with persons of the household and discover Sir Hune’s treasure vault, together with all other precious gems,

coins and objects of gold and silver. Make an inventory, then confiscate all to the interest of the royal exchequer, which should bring at least a trifle of pleasure to this melancholy day.”

Sir Maloof found little enough treasure: a few salvers, cups and plates of silver; a hundred gold coins, and some trinkets of garnet, tourmaline and jasper. Sir Pirmence consoled the bereaved women with great skill, and sent them off to the places of their kin. Sir Tristano returned with grisly news. “I find no invalids nor persons in hiding. No one survives in the house, save only those in the dungeons. I counted eight prisoners and three torturers; then I could no longer bear the

stench.”

Aillas’ heart went cold. “Torturers, then? I might have suspected as much. Tristano, you must do more. Take some men of strong stomach and go down into the dungeons. Liberate the prisoners and clap the torturers into chains. Then make use of our new soldiers.” Aillas indicated Sir Hune’s former henchmen. “Order them to bring into the light of day all those implements and instruments now in the dungeons, and we will make sure that no one else puts them to use.”

The eight prisoners were brought up from the dungeons, limping, hopping, sidling, some moving their legs with

tender delicacy, groaning and whimpering with each step: the legacy of overmuch familiarity with the rack. Two could not walk in any fashion whatever, and were carried out on pallets. All eight were in sorry state. Their garments were rags; they stank with encrustations of filth and ordure, and hair lay matted and pasted against their scalps. The six who could walk huddled together, peering from the side of their faces, half-fearful, half-apathetic.

The three torturers stood apart, surly, uncertain, but feigning a disdainful detachment from the situation. One was a ponderous big-bellied hulk, chinless and with only a hint of neck. The second was

elderly, with high shoulders, a tall forehead and long chin. The third, who seemed no more than Aillas' own age, smiled with unconvincing bravado first out at the troops, then up at the bodies on the gibbet.

Aillas spoke in a sad voice to the former prisoners: "Be easy; you are free! No one will harm you now."

One of the men responded in a husky whisper: " 'Now' is now, but 'then' is gone! My name is Nols; I know that only so I may hide when I am called. The rest is like a dream."

Another looked in wonder at the gibbet.

He pointed a claw-like finger: “There hangs Sir Hune, heavy as lard! Is it not a marvel? Dead Sir Hune! Sweet dead Sir Hune! As dear to my eyes as the face of my mother!”

Nols also pointed. “I see Cissies and Nook and Luton! Are they still to be our jailers?”

“Indeed not,” said Aillas. “They are to be hanged, which is perhaps too easy an end for them. Sergeant! Hoist high these three horrors.”

“Hold!” cried the young torturer Luton in a sudden sweat. “We obeyed orders, no more! Had we not done so, a dozen



others would have leapt forward to take over our posts!”

“And today they would dangle from the gibbet instead of you... . Sergeant, take them aloft.”

“Hurrah!” quavered Nols, and his fellows joined him in a gasping chorus of cheers. “But what of Black Thrumbo? Why does he go free, and see him standing there with so kind and gentle a smile on his face.”

“Who is Black Thrumbo?”

“There he stands, Chief Archer to Sir Hune. He favors the whip because its

song is true. Ho, Black Thrumbo, I see you there! Why do you not greet me? You have been so familiar with me and my parts; now you are so distant!”

Aillas looked where Nols pointed.  
“Which is Thrumbo?”

“In the leather helmet, with a face like the moon. He is chief among the torturers.”

Aillas called out: “Thrumbo, you may step over to the gibbet, if you will. I have no need for torturers in my army.”

Thrumbo turned and made a desperate dash for the hillside, hoping to scramble

to freedom, but, as he was somewhat corpulent and short of breath, he was quickly captured and dragged sobbing and cursing to the gibbet. An hour later Aillas returned with his troops to Doun Darric.

### III

THE BARONS OF SOUTH ULFLAND were convened in a second conclave at Doun Darric. On this occasion beef turned on the spit and a tun of good wine stood ready for the broaching.

Today there were no truants; all the barons of South Ulfland were on hand. Their mood, as they conferred privately

and sat at the table, was somewhat different than on the previous occasion. They seemed glum and thoughtful, troubled rather than truculent.

Before too much wine was consumed, Aillas delivered his message. Today he sat quiet while a fanfare from a pair of clarions commanded silence. Then a herald, climbing onto a bench, read from a scroll:

“All hear these words, which are those of King Aillas! I speak in his voice!  
‘Recently Sir Hune of Three Pines House disobeyed my explicit orders, and all present know how went the aftermath. In his dungeons he kept

prisoners, contrary to the spirit if not the letter of my law.

“I will shortly issue a code of justice, uniform with that of Troicinet and Dascinet. In each county of the land, sheriffs and magistrates will be designated. They will administer all justice: high, middle and low. The persons here today will be relieved of what can only be an onerous responsibility.

“That responsibility is terminated. All prisoners held in durance by persons now present must be released into the custody of my representatives, who will return with each of you to your home-

places. Hereafter you may no longer  
immure, incarcerate nor confine any of  
my subjects, at The risk of royal  
displeasure, which Sir Hune discovered  
to be swift and definite.

“I further discovered that Sir Hune  
indulged himself in the torture of his  
enemies. This is vile and ignoble, no  
matter what the justification. I hereby  
declare torture, in all its categories, to  
be a capital offense, punishable by death  
and confiscation of property.

“In all fairness I cannot punish crimes  
committed before my proscription,  
despite my inclination. You need fear no  
such reprisal. At this time either Sir

Pirmence, Sir Maloof or Sir Tristano will interview each of you in turn. You must give information regarding prisoners in your custody, with their names and condition, and also the names of torturers in your employ. Then you will immediately depart for home, and the listed prisoners will be delivered to my representatives, who will also take your torturers into custody. Since I do not want these persons loosed into the general population, they will be brought here to Doun Darric and probably enlisted into a special corps of my army. Those among you who employed the torturers are no less culpable than they, but, as previously stated, I cannot punish you for crimes committed before my

proscription.

“Sir Pirmence, Sir Maloof and Sir Tristano are now at work among you. I urge that you cooperate and impart exact information, as these declarations will be verified.’

“Such, my lords, are the words of his Majesty, King Aillas.”

## IV

THE BARONS HAD DEPARTED, most to take lodging for the night with friends or kin along the way to their homes. Each had gone in company with a Troice knight and six soldiers, to ensure the



exact fulfillment of King Aillas' law, which in many cases consisted of a prisoner exchange between hostile castles.

Aillas and Tristano sat long into the evening discussing the events of the day. Sir Tristano, in his conversations, had discovered no further news of Sir Shalles. He had last been seen at the remote castle of Sir Mulsant, one of the barons most intransigent of all.

“Mulsant's point of view is not without logic,” said Tristano. “He lives under the Cloudcutters, where outlaws are rife; if he disbanded his garrison, he declares that he would not survive a week, and I

tend to believe him. And now Torqual has intruded on the scene. Until we can hold him in check, we cannot fairly insist that folk of the region both go defenseless and endorse our cause.”

Aillas gloomily considered the statement. “Truly, our recourses are distasteful. If we strike at Torqual in North Ulfland, our chance of success is negligible and we challenge the Ska. Now, of all times, we want to let sleeping dogs lie.”

“No one will argue with this point of view.”

Aillas heaved a deep sigh and slumped

back in his chair. “Once again dreamful hopes founder on the rocks of reality. I must adapt to the harsh facts. So long as Sir Mulsant and others like him cause us no embarrassment, I appoint them ‘Wardens of the March.’”

“All this is called ‘the art of practical kingship,’ ” said Tristano; then he and Aillas spoke of different subjects.

# Chapter 8

## I

SHALLES, ARRIVING IN LYONESSE TOWN, went directly to Haidion and in due course was taken to a small sitting room in the Tower of Owls where King Casmir sat studying charts and maps. Shalles performed a suitable bow and waited while King Casmir closed his portfolio, using a ponderous deliberation, which anyone with a guilty conscience could only find ominous.

At last King Casmir swung about and looked Shalles over from head to toe, as

if he had never seen him before. He gestured to a chair; when Shalles had seated himself, Casmir said, “Sir Shalles, I see that you have been traveling hard; what have you to tell me?”

Encouraged by Casmir’s use of the honorific, Shalles, who had been sitting on the edge of his chair, relaxed a trifle back into the seat. He considered his words carefully, since they might well make his fortune, or yield him nothing, if he failed to gain King Casmir’s approval. “In general, sir, I cannot fairly give you an amplitude of good news. King Aillas has acted with decision and to good effect. He has kept his opponents

off-balance and denied them a basis for insubordination. He is popular with the common folk, and also the aristocracy of the lower fells and the shore, who value order and prosperity more than an unqualified franchise, which they never had, in any case.”

“Has there been measurable resistance to an alien king?”

“The most noteworthy example is that of Sir Hune of Three Pines House. He openly violated the new laws; almost before he did the deed his castle was in ruins and he swung high on a gibbet. This is language which the Ulfs understand.” Casmir gave a sour grunt.

Shalles continued. “Aillas discovered full dungeons at Three Pines House. He called a conclave, where he banned private justice, and emptied every dungeon in the land. By and large, the edict won him approval, since the barons fear nothing more than their enemies’ dungeons, where, if captured, they are punished for the sins of their grandfathers.

“In clearing the dungeons, Aillas confiscated all their gear. I am told that he took forty racks, seven tons of tools, and one hundred torturers. These are now a special corps in the royal army. Their cheeks are tattooed black; their uniforms are black and yellow and they

wear ‘mad-dog’ helmets. They are considered pariahs and live apart from the other troops.”

“Bah!” muttered Casmir. “There is a reek of over-niceness to this milk-sop king. What else?”

“I will now render an account of my own activities. They have been diligent, dangerous and miserably uncomfortable.” With a somewhat forced enthusiasm in the face of King Casmir’s unresponsive stare, Shalles described the range of his activities, and did not fail to mention the perils he encountered almost daily. “With a price on my head, I finally decided that I could



do no more. My slanders, while always popular, were never corroborated and exerted no lasting influence. During the course of my work I discovered a strange fact, to this effect: the staid stark stupid truth carries more conviction than the most entrancing falsehoods, even though the latter sometimes receive more currency. Still, I was sufficiently irksome that Aillas tried with might and main to capture me, and I was constantly skipping away just barely clear of apprehension.”

With hooded eyes and in the mildest of voices King Casmir asked: “And what do you suppose might have been your fate had you been captured?”

Shalles's sensitivities were keen. After only the most imperceptible of hesitations, he said: "That is hard to say. Aillas bruited about an offer to pay me twice your own stipend, if I became a turncoat. He intended, so I suspect, only a disparagement of my reputation, and in fact the ploy reduced my credibility to nothing."

King Casmir gave a thoughtful nod. "A rumor of this offer reached me through other sources. What of Torqual?"

Shalles paused to gather his thoughts. "I have seen Torqual at various times, though not as often as I wished. He goes his way without reference to my advice,

but he seems to be serving your good interests. He is insatiable in his demands for gold, that he may the better augment his power. We were together at the reduction of Three Pines House; we stood with peasants across the meadow. Torqual tells me that, first, he has been learning the terrain, and, second, that he has recruited the nucleus of a following. He has found a bolt-hole in North Ulfland from which he can penetrate South Ulfland on raids. He has let it be known that his favored victims will be those who obey the king's command-a tactic which persuades the Ska to ignore him. Gradually he thinks to extend his power over all the high moors." Here Shalles gave a shrug.

King Casmir asked: “You would seem to doubt his success?”

“In the long run, yes. He thinks only of destruction, which is not a sound basis for a stable rule. Still, I cannot read the future. In the Ulflands anything can happen.”

“So it seems,” mused King Casmir. “So it seems.”

Shalles said somberly: “I wish I could bring you news kinder to your ears, since my fortune depends upon pleasing you.”

King Casmir rose to his feet and went to look down into the fire. At length he said: "You may go. In the morning we will talk further."

Shalles bowed and departed in a cheerless mood. Lacking compliments from King Casmir, he had not dared bring up the subject of reward.

In the morning King Casmir again conferred with Shalles, and attempted to glean more information about Torqual, but Shalles could only reiterate his statements of the day before. Finally King Casmir tendered him a sealed packet. "At the stable a good horse awaits. I have another small mission for

you. Ride north into Pomperol by Icniel Way. At the village Honriot turn left and ride through Dahaut into Forest Tantrevalles. Go to Faroli and give this message into the hand of the wizard Tamurello. I expect that he will have a response for you.”

## II

IN DUE COURSE SHALLES RETURNED to Haidion. He was at once admitted into the presence of King Casmir, to whom he delivered a parcel.

King Casmir appeared in no haste to learn the contents of the parcel. He laid it on the table and, turning to Shalles, in

an almost gracious manner asked: “How went the journey?”

“The journey went well, sir. I rode at speed to Faroli, which I found without undue difficulty.”

“And what do you make of Faroli?”

“It is a splendid manse of silver and glass and precious black wood. Silver poles support the roof, which is like the roof of an enormous many-sided tent, but for its sheathing of green silver tiles. The gate was guarded by a pair of gray lions, double the size of the ordinary beast, with fur as glossy as fine silk. They rose up on their hind legs and

called out: ‘Halt, as you value your life!’ I named myself the emissary of King Casmir, and they let me pass without emotion.”

“And Tamurello himself? I am told that he never seems the same man twice.”

“As to that, sir, I cannot say. He appeared to be tall, very thin and very pale, with black hair in a tall crest over his scalp. His eyes glowed like carbuncles and his robe was embroidered in silver signs. I gave him your message, which he read at once. Then he said: ‘Await me here. Do not move by so much as a pace or the lions will tear you to bits.’”



“I waited, as still as stone, while the lions sat watching. Presently Tamurello returned. He gave me that packet which I have just presented to your Majesty, and quelled his lions so that I could take my departure. I returned to Haidion at best speed, and there is no more to be told.”

“Well done, Shalles.” King Casmir looked toward the parcel as if he might now open it, but once again turned back to Shalles.

“And now you will wish to be rewarded for your services.”

Shalles bowed. “As your Majesty so pleases.”

“And what might be your desires?”

“Most of all, sir, I wish a small estate near the town Poinxter in Gray wold County, where my family resides and where I was born.”

King Casmir compressed his lips. “A bucolic life makes one sluggish and reluctant of foot when he goes out on the king’s service. He thinks more of his hives and his calving and the set of his grapes than of the royal necessities.”

“In truth, your Majesty, I have reached that time in life when I am no longer apt for midnight skulking and sinister plots. My brain has grown heavy along with

my belly; it is time that I settled to a life where my great adventure of the day is a fox in the chicken-run. In short, your Majesty, pray excuse me from further service. These last months have brought me dreads in the dark and nimble escapes enough for a lifetime.”

“Do you have an estate in mind?”

“I have not taken time to search the area, sir.”

“And what quality estate do you consider your effort of this short period has earned?”

“If I were paid for time alone, three gold

crowns would suffice. If you ask the value I put on my life, I would not sell for ten caravans laden with emeralds, not even if six shiploads of gold were added for an inducement. So I would wish to be paid with some regard for the risks I took with my costly life, for priceless plots and inspired slander, for windy nights on the moors while honest men slept snug in their beds. Your Majesty, I submit without question to your generosity. I may say that I would rejoice at a gentleman's house beside a good stream, with ten acres of woodland and three or four farms out at leasehold."

King Casmir smiled. "Shalles, if you have used as much fluency in my service

as you have in your own, your requests are mild and fair, and so I must judge them.” He wrote upon a parchment, performed a flourishing signature and handed the document to Shalles. “Here is the royal patent upon an unnamed property. Go to Poinxter, discover a suitable premise of the style you stipulate, and present this patent to the county reeve. Do not thank me. You may go.”

Shalles bowed low and departed.

King Casmir stood brooding into the fire. The parcel from Tamurello rested on the table. King Casmir summoned his aide of all purposes Oldebor.

“Sir, your wishes?”

“You will recall Shalles.”

“Distinctly, sir.”

“He has returned from a brief stint in South Ulfland with exaggerated expectations and perhaps a too intimate knowledge of my affairs. Does your experience suggest a manner of dealing with Shalles?”

“Yes, sir.”

“See to it. He is on his way to Poinxter in County Gray wold. He carries a document signed by me which I would

wish returned.” King Casmir turned back to the fire and Oldebor departed the sitting room. King Casmir at last opened the parcel to discover a stuffed blackbird mounted on a stand. A sheet of parchment, folded and tucked between the bird’s legs, read:

To hold converse with. Tamurelo, pluck a feather from the belly of the Bird and place in the flame of a candle.

Casmir examined the stuffed bird, taking critical note of drooping wings, molting feathers and a half-open beak.

The look of the bird might or might not convey an overtone of sardonic meaning.

Dignity, however, prompted Casmir to ignore all but the explicit purport of bird and message. He departed the chamber, descended curving stone steps, passed through an arched portal into the Long Gallery. He walked with a ponderous tread, looking neither right nor left, and footmen at their posts along the gallery jerked quickly erect, aware that the apparently abstracted gaze of the round blue eyes in fact apprehended every detail.

King Casmir entered the Hall of Honours, a vast high-ceilinged chamber reserved for the most solemn of state occasions, to which King Casmir had vowed to restore the throne Evandig and



the table Cairbra an Meadhan. The Hall of Honours was now furnished with his own ceremonial throne, a long central table and, around the walls, fifty-four massive chairs, representing the fifty-four noble houses of Lyonesse.

To Casmir's annoyance, he discovered the princess Madouc playing alone among the chairs, jumping from seat to seat, balancing on the arms, squirming through the underbraces.

For a moment Casmir stood watching. A curious child, he thought, self-willed to the point of intractability. She never cried, except sometimes in small furious gasps of vexation when someone dared

to thwart her. How different yet how alike were Madouc and her mother Suldrun (such was Casmir's understanding of the case), whose dreamy docility had masked an obduracy as hard as his own.

Madouc, at last aware of Casmir's cold stare, paused in her antics.' She turned to watch Casmir with a gaze of mild curiosity mingled with displeasure at this unsuitable and blundering invasion of her privacy. Like Princess Suldrun before, Madouc regarded this chamber as her personal domain.

Casmir came slowly into the room, never relaxing his cold blue stare, in

order that the saucy little minx might be overawed. Madouc's gaze dropped to the stuffed bird which Casmir was carrying. While she neither giggled nor even smiled. Casmir knew that she was amused at the picture he made.

Madouc, becoming bored with both bird and Casmir, resumed her play. She jumped from the arm of one chair to the arm of the next, then glanced around to see if Casmir were still in the room.

Casmir halted by the table. He spoke in an even voice, which, echoing against the stone walls, seemed to become grating and harsh. "Princess, what do you do here?"

Madouc supplied Casmir with the information he seemed to require. "I am playing on the chairs."

"This is not the place for your game. Go and play somewhere else."

Madouc jumped down from the chair and ran hopping and skipping from the room. Without a backward glance she was gone.

Casmir took the bird around the Great Throne of Haidion to the back wall and through the hangings into a storeroom. Here he manipulated the lock of a secret door. It swung wide and Casmir was allowed access into that chamber where

he kept his magical trinkets and artifacts. The most valuable of his belongings, Persilian the Magic Mirror, had been lost some five years before, and to this day Casmir was uncertain as to how the mirror had been sequestered and who was responsible. To his knowledge, no one knew of the secret chamber save himself. He would have been dumbfounded to learn the truth: that the culprits were Princess Suldrun and her lover Aillas, then Prince of Troicinet, who had taken Persilian at the behest of Persilian himself.

Casmir glanced suspiciously around the room, to assure himself that none of his other properties had disappeared. All

seemed in order. A globe of swirling green and purple flame illuminated the chamber. An imp in a bottle glowered at him and tapped fingernails against the glass, hoping to engage his attention. On a table rested an object of astronomical significance, presented to one of Casmir's ancestors by Queen Dido of Carthage; and as always Casmir bent to examine the instrument, which exhibited an amazing complexity. The base was a circular ebony platter, marked around the rim with signs of the zodiac. The golden ball at the center, so Casmir had been told, represented the sun. Nine silver balls of various size rolled in circular troughs around the center, but for what purpose was a secret known

only to the ancients. The third ball from the center was accompanied by a smaller ball and made its circuit in exactly one year, which only perplexed Casmir the more: if the object were a chronometer designed to measure yearly intervals, then why the other balls, some of which moved almost imperceptibly? Casmir no longer speculated in regard to the object and now gave it only a cursory survey. He placed the stuffed bird on a shelf and considered it a moment. At last he turned away. Before initiating a conversation with Tamurello, he must decide carefully what he wished to discuss.

Departing the secret chamber, Casmir

passed through the Hall of Honours and stepped out into the gallery. Here, as luck would have it, he encountered Queen Sollace and Father Umphred. They had been out together in the royal carriage, inspecting sites for a cathedral.

Queen Sollace told Casmir: “The optimum site is clear; we have seen it and measured it: that area just to the north of the harbour entrance!”

Father Umphred spoke in enthusiasm: “Already a sweet sanctity surrounds your remarkable spouse! I would like to see, flanking the grand front entrance, two statues worked in imperishable bronze: on one hand the noble King



Casmir and on the other the saintly Queen Sollace!”

“Have I not declared the project impractical?” demanded King Casmir. “Who will pay for such nonsense?”

Father Umphred sighed and raised his gaze to the ceiling. “The Lord will provide.”

“Indeed?” asked King Casmir. “How, and in what style?”

” ‘Take no other gods before me!’ So spoke the Lord on Mount Sinai! Each new Christian may properly atone for his years of sin by dedicating his wealth and

his labor to the construction of a great temple; thus will be eased his way into Paradise.”

Casmir shrugged. “If fools so want to spend their money, why should I complain?”

Queen Sollace gave a glad cry. “Then we have your permission to proceed?”

“So long as you faithfully adhere to each and every provision of royal law.”

“Ah, your Majesty, that is glorious news!” cried Father Umphred. “Still, to which provisions of the law are we susceptible? I assume that ordinary

custom will here prevail?”

“I am unacquainted with these ‘ordinary customs,’” said King Casmir. “The laws are simple enough. First, under no circumstances, may moneys or other articles of value, be exported from Lyonesse to Rome.”

Father Umphred winced and blinked.  
“From time to time-”

King Casmir spoke on. “All moneys collected must be declared to the Chancellor of the Royal Exchequer, who will levy the appropriate tax, which will be deducted in advance of all else. He will also fix the annual rent upon the

land.”

“Ah!” groaned Father Umphred. “That is a discouraging prospect! It cannot be! No secular power may levy tax upon property of the church!”

“In that case, I retract and renounce my permission! Let no cathedral be built at Lyonesse Town, now or ever!”

King Casmir went his way, with Queen Sollace and Father Umphred looking disconsolately after him.

“He is a most obstinate man!” said Queen Sollace. “I have prayed that the Lord bring the balm of religion into his

heart, and today I felt that my prayers had been answered. But now he is settled; barring some miracle, he will never change.”

Father Umphred said thoughtfully: “I can supply no miracles, but I know certain facts which Casmir would go to great lengths to learn.”

Queen Sollace gave him a questioning look. “Which facts are these?”

“Dear Queen, I must pray for guidance! Light from above must show me the path.”

Queen Sollace’s face took on a petulant

droop. "Tell me and allow me to advise you."

"Dear Queen, dear blessed lady! It is not so easy! I must pray."

### III

TWO DAYS LATER KING CASMIR RETURNED to the secret room. He plucked a feather from the belly of the stuffed blackbird and took it away to his private parlour, at the side of his bedroom. Lighting a candle from the fire, he thrust the feather into the flame, where it burned with little puffs of acrid smoke.

King Casmir watched the wisps  
dissipate into the air. He called:  
“Tamurello? Do you hear me? It is I,  
Casmir of Lyonesse.”

From the shadows spoke a voice: “Well  
then, Casmir: what now?”

“Tamurello? Is it you whom I hear?”

“What do you wish of me?”

“A sign that I truly speak with  
Tamurello.”

“Do you remember Shalles who now  
lies sightless in a ditch with his throat  
cut?”

“I remember Shalles.”

“Did he tell how he saw me?”

“Yes.”

“I showed him the wizard Amach ac Eil of Caerwyddwn in the full of my black dreuhwy.<sup>13</sup>”

Tamurello mentions the idea apparently in a spirit of mockery or as an extravagant flourish in response to Casmir’s rather heavy insistence upon identification.

King Casmir grunted in acquiescence. “I call your name now for a reason. My



ventures stagnate. I feel frustration and anger on this account.”

“Ah, Casmir, on my word you ignore such good fortune which the Cutter of Threads has allowed you! At Haidion you bask at your ease in the warmth of a dozen blazing hearths. Your table is mounded with succulence and savor! You sleep between silken sheets; your raiment is the softest cloth; gold adorns your person. There seems an adequate population of voluptuous boys; in this regard you never need fear deprivation. When someone excites your displeasure, you utter two words and he is murdered, if he is lucky. If he is unlucky, he goes to the Peinhador. All in all, I consider you

a fortunate man.”

Casmir ignored the gibes, which exaggerated his appetites; indeed, he was almost austere in his use of catamites. “Yes, yes; no doubt you are right. Still, these remarks fit your case as pointedly as they do my own. I suspect that you are often provoked when events fail to suit you.”

From the shadows came a soft laugh. “One signal difference between the cases! You are applying to me, not I to you.”

Casmir responded in even tones: “I appreciate the distinction.”

“Still, you have deftly probed my sore spot. Murgan has discovered one or two of my foibles and makes as if the world were about to end, as perhaps it will someday. Have you heard of his latest quirk?”

“No.”

“A magician named Shimrod lives at Trilda, near the village Twamble.”

“I am acquainted with Shimrod.”

“If you can believe it, Murgan has appointed Shimrod to be my monitor and overseer, to ensure my deference to Murgan’s will.”

“That would seem an irksome case.”

“No matter. Should Shimrod swallow himself like a revolving snake, it is all one with me. He is easily confused; I will do as I did before, and poor Shimrod will go sprawling down uncharted abysses.”

King Casmir made a cautious suggestion: “Our destinies may well go hand in hand. Perhaps we can profit by an association.”

Again the soft laugh from the shadows. “I can put toad-heads on your enemies! I can change the stone of their castles to suet pudding. I can enchant the surf, to

bring sea-warriors with mother-of-pearl eyes charging ashore out of each breaking wave! But never may I do so! Even if, through some folly, I thought it advisable.”

King Casmir said patiently: “I understand that this must be so. Still ...”

” ‘Still’?”

“Still this. Persilian the Magic Mirror once spoke out to me, though I had put no charge upon him. The utterance defies both fact and reason, and causes me a great puzzlement.”

“And what was the utterance?”

“Persilian spoke like this:

Suldrun’s son shall undertake Before his  
life is gone To sit his right and proper  
place At Cairbra an Meadhan. If so he  
sits and so he thrives Then he shall make  
his own The Table Round, to Casmir’s  
woe, And Evandig the Throne.

“So spoke Persilian, and would say no  
more. When Suldrun bore the girl  
Madouc, I went to question Persilian,  
but then he was gone. I have long  
brooded over this matter. Somewhere  
among those words lives wisdom, had I  
the wit to search it out.”

After a moment the voice responded: “I

care nothing for you or your prospects; and I will listen to no reproaches should your affairs go badly. Still, I am driven by my own forces in a direction which may for a time run parallel to your own. My impulse is detestation. It fixes upon Murgen, his scion Shimrod, and King Aillas of Troicinet, who at Tintzin Fyral did me savage and irreparable harm. Count me not your friend but the enemy of your enemies.”

Casmir gave a grim chuckle. At Tintzin Fyral Aillas had hanged Tamurello’s lover Faude Carfilhiot on a gallows grotesquely high, and gaunt as a spider’s leg. “Very well; you have made yourself clear.”

“Do not be too sure,” said the voice, speaking sharply. “Your surmises in regard to me will surely be incorrect! At this time Murgan’s calculated affronts cause me a great wrath. He uses the charlatan Shimrod as counterpoise to me, and sets him to bait me with his surveillances. Shimrod becomes self-important and pompous; he expects me to make a daily report upon my conduct. Ha! I will show him conduct to scorch his backside!”

“All very well,” said Casmir. “What of Persilian’s prediction? He spoke of ‘son,’ but Suldrun bore a daughter only: is the prediction false?”



“Uncertain! These apparent contradictions often are masks for startling truth.”

“If so, what might be such a ‘startling truth’?”

“I suspect that she bore another child.”

Casmir blinked. “That cannot be so.”

“Well then: who was the father?”

“A nameless vagabond. In anger I did away with him.”

“He might have had much to tell you. Who else could recite precise facts?”

“There was the serving woman, and her parents, who nurtured the baby.” Casmir frowned as he thought back across the past. “The woman was a stubborn sow; she would tell me nothing.”

“She might be tricked, or inveigled. The parents might also know facts not yet revealed.”

Casmir grunted. “This seems to me a dry source. The parents were old; they might be dead.”

“Perhaps so. Still, if you like, I can send you a man who is a ferret for smelling out secrets.”

“That will suit me well.”

“Let me instruct you. His name is Visbhume. He is a wizard of very limited skill and certain curious habits, owing perhaps to yellow bloom in the cracks of the brain. You must overlook his peculiarities, and give precise orders, since at times he is flighty. Visbhume lacks all qualms; if you want your grandmother strangled, Visbhume will oblige, with care and courtesy, or, if you prefer, he will strangle his own grandmother.”

Casmir gave a dubious grunt. “Can he be trusted for steadfastness?”

“Indeed! Once started he is obsessive; he never stops, as if he is pushed by an incessant rhythm inside his head. He cannot be deterred by fear, or hunger or lust; he lacks interest in ordinary sexual procedures, and I am not even curious as to his personal habits.”

Casmir gave another grunt. “I care nothing for such matters, so long as he does his work.”

“He is single-minded. Still, supervise him closely, as his is a strange personality.”

## IV

ONCE EACH WEEK KING CASMIR SAT TO DELIVER royal justice in the cold gray juridical chambers beside the old Great Hall. His chair was placed on a low dais, at the back of a massive table, with a man-at-arms, halberd at the ready, posted to either side.

At these occasions King Casmir wore always a black velvet cap encircled by a light silver crown, together with a flowing cape of black silk. This costume, so he believed, and correctly so, augmented the mood of somber and implacable justice which already hung heavy in the room.

During testimony King Casmir sat

motionless, staring with cold blue eyes at the witness. He pronounced his decisions tersely, in a flat voice, without regard for rank, status or connection, and for the most part fairly, without extreme or harsh penalty, that he might enhance his reputation across the land as a wise and equable ruler.

At the end of the day's assizes, an underchamberlain approached the table: "My lord, a certain Visbhume awaits audience; he states that he is here by your command."

"Bring him here." Casmir dismissed the court officials and ordered the guards to take up their stations outside the door.

Visbhume, entering the dour and solemn chamber, found himself alone with the king. He advanced on long bent-kneed strides, to halt close by the table, where he inspected King Casmir with placid bird-like curiosity and a total absence of awe.

King Casmir drew back from Visbhume's appraisal, which seemed over-familiar and even brash. He frowned and at once, Visbhume put on an ingratiating smile.

King Casmir pointed to a chair. "Sit." As Tamurello had indicated, Visbhume made no immediately favorable impression. He stood tall, with narrow

shoulders, a gaunt chest and large hips, and hunched forward, as if in eagerness to get on with the duties at hand. His head and nose were both narrow and long; black hair seemed painted upon his scalp and made a stark contrast with his pasty skin. Arsenical shadows outlined his eyes; his mouth hung in loose-lipped folds over a sharp chin.

Visbhume seated himself. King Casmir asked: “You are Visbhume, sent here by Tamurello?”

“Sir, I am he.”

King Casmir folded his hands and fixed Visbhume with his most gelid stare.



“Tell me something of yourself.”

“Gladly! I am a person of many talents, some unusual or even unique, though to the casual eye I seem a person of ordinary gentility. My skills transcend my appearance; I am astute and subtle; I study the arcane sciences; I have an exact memory. I am clever at dissolving mysteries.”

“That is an impressive catalogue of attributes,” said King Casmir. “Were you then born to nobility?”

“Sir, I have no knowledge of my birth, though certain indications lead me to suspect that I am the by-blow of a ducal

amour. My earliest recollections are a farm to the far north of Dahaut, hard by the Wysrod March. As a nameless foundling I was forced into a life of stultifying toil. In due course I fled the farm and became first servant, then apprentice, to Hippolito the Magician, at Maule. I learned axioms and principles of the Grand Art; I was well on the way to great affairs!

“Alas, all things change. Ten years ago, on Glamus Eve, Hippolito flew away from Maule on a shingle and never returned. After a respectful interval I took command of the premises, and perhaps I was too bold, but that is my way; I march to music unheard by

ordinary ears! Urgent trumpets, clashing-”

King Casmir made an impatient movement. “I am interested less in your inner sounds than in concrete details of your abilities.”

“Very well, sir. My ambitions aroused the malice of a jealous cabal, and I was forced to flee for my life. I hitched Hippolito’s iron-legged goat to a cart, and rode at a gallop away from Maule. In due course, I allied myself with Tamurello, and we have taught each other our special lores.

“At this moment I find myself at loose

ends, and when Tamurello mentioned your troubles and prayed that I relieve your distress, I gave my assent. Explain, then, your difficulties, that I may subject them to my best analysis.”

“The case is simple,” said King Casmir. “Five years ago the then Princess Suldrun gave birth to a daughter: the present Princess Madouc. Certain circumstances in regard to the birth remain a matter for conjecture. For instance, might twins have been born? By the time these matters had come to my attention both Suldrun and the father were dead.”

“And you were vouchsafed the single

baby?”

“Correct. The child originally was taken by one Ehirme, a serving woman, and given into the care of her parents, from whom we recovered it. I wish to learn all the facts relevant to the case, which I neglected at the time.”

“Ah hah! And quite rightly so! Who was her father?”

“This fact was never clarified. I see no other point of attack to the case than the serving woman, who at the time occupied a small farmstead south down Lirlong Way. The facts are now five years old; still their traces may persist.”

“So I am confident! The full truth will surely be forthcoming.”

V

VISBHUME CAME ONCE MORE TO HAIDON and there reported his findings. In his lively enthusiasm, he came forward to stand in almost intimate proximity to King Casmir, and there thrust his head forward. “Ehirme the serving woman, with her entire family, has removed to Troicinet!”

King Casmir leaned pointedly back from the waft of Visbhume’s breath, and pointed to a chair. “Be seated. . . .

Troicinet, you say. Where did you learn this?”

Visbhume with many a nice flourish seated himself. “I had the news from Ehirme’s sister, whose spouse fishes out of Took’s Hole. Further-” here Visbhume tilted his head archly sidewise “-can you guess?”

“No. Say on.”

“Graithe and Wynes are the father and mother of Ehirme. They too have taken themselves part and parcel to Troicinet.

The sister says that they all prosper and live as gentry, and herein I detect more

than a trace of envy, which may colour the testimony.”

“Indeed.” Here was scope for rumination. Might King Aillas be taking an interest in his private affairs? “How long have they lived in Troicinet?”

“Several years. The woman is indefinite and I truly believe has no sense of time.”

“Well, no matter. It seems that now you must cross the Lir to Troicinet.”

Visbhume called out plaintively: “Ah, woe and dismay! But I will go, though I detest the uncertain motion of a boat! Nor is it easy for me to overlook the wet



depths below, which were never meant for man.”

“So it must be. Aillas still performs his spoliation in South Ulfland, and works opposition to my plans. Go then to Troicinet; learn the full scope of this business, since it bears upon the succession to my throne.”

Visbhume leaned forward, twitching in curiosity. “How can that be? Prince Cassander is your heir!”

“Quite so,” said King Casmir. “For the moment you need concern yourself only with the problems I have outlined. What are the exact details surrounding the

birth of Suldun's child? Might there have been twins? If so, where is the other child? Are you clear on this?"

"Yes, of course!" Visbhume stated. "I am instantly off to Troicinet, despite my dread of every wave of the cruel black sea! Now I say, let them rear their highest! Never will they stay my passage! Casmir, I bid you farewell!"

Visbhume turned and marched on long prancing steps from the chamber. Casmir gave his head a sour shake and turned to other business.

An hour later the chamberlain announced a messenger newly arrived at Lyonesse

Town. “He says he has come at haste; his message is reserved for your ears alone.”

“His name?”

“He states that it would mean nothing, either to you or to me.”

“Bring him here.”

Into the chamber came a thin young man with a hideously scarred face. His garments were dusty and travel-worn; his station in life would not appear to be high, and he spoke with a thick peasant's accent.

“Your Majesty, I have been sent to you by Torqual, who says that you know him well.”

“True. Speak on.”

“He is in need of gold crowns, that he may do your bidding. He states that he sent this message by Shalles, and he would learn whether you despatched gold in the custody of Shalles, or did not do so.”

King Casmir rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I gave Shalles no gold for Torqual. He asked for none... . Why does Torqual need gold?”

“He has not confided his business to me.”

“And you are his associate?”

“I am. The new king has forbidden that men should fight, nor may they take their just revenge. But see what Sir Elphin of Floon Castle has done to me? I care nothing for Aillas and less for his law; once I do my work on Elphin of Floon, Aillas can kill me as dead as he likes.”

“So what is this to Torqual?”

“We are outlaws; we roam the far fells like a wolf-pack. Recently we have found a den, where none can pursue us,

and now we need gold to furnish this den and buy a store of victual, which is easier to buy than to steal.”

“How much gold do you come for?”

“A hundred gold crowns.”

“What? Do you plan to feed on ortolans and the honey of jasmine flowers? I will supply you forty crowns; you must eat barley porridge and drink ewe’s milk.”

“I can only take what you give me.”

King Casmir, rising, went to the door.

“Dominic!” The man-at-arms guarding the door looked about. “Your Majesty?”

“I have a dangerous mission for a stalwart man.”

“Sir, I am the man you seek.”

“Prepare yourself, then; you must ride the road north with a bag of gold, and bring me news of its delivery. This gentleman, I do not know his name, will guide your way.”

“It shall be done, sir.”

# Chapter 9

## I

CASTLE CLARRIE STOOD in one of the most remote areas of South Ulfland, twenty miles from the North Ulfland border and close under the Cloudcutters, three desolate peaks of the Teach tac Teach.

The master of Castle Clarrie and its lands was Lord Loftus, one of the barons least malleable to the rule of the new king. He based his intransigence upon the facts of recent history: namely, the raids of Ska slave-takers. These



episodes had become less numerous of recent years; nevertheless parties of Ska, intent on one errand or another, still passed along the High Road, only a few miles to the east.

Further, Lord Loftus' neighbors included some, like Mott of Motterby Keep and Elphin of Floon, who were no less intractable than himself, and many were members of a hostile clan.

Castle Clarrie's traditional enemy had for centuries been the Gosse family of Fian Gosse, a castle in a glen twenty miles south of Clarrie. Unlike Lord Loftus, the young Lord Bodwy had decided to support King Aillas in all his

programs, hoping to find a cessation to the bloody tangle which had killed his father, uncles and grandfather and innumerable kin long before their time.

At the Doun Darric conclave, Bodwy had approached Lord Loftus of Clarrie, and expressed the hope that trust and amity might grow between their two houses, and he pledged all his efforts to nurture a reconciliation, stating that the interests of no one were served by continued hostility.

Lord Loftus had made a rather stiff response, to the effect that he would take no new initiatives against the Gosse.

Therefore, a month later, Lord Bodwy listened with surprise to the tale of his herdsman Sturdivant: “They wore Clarrie green, with the Clarrie epaulettes; there were four, though I could recognize none by sight. Still, they were absolutely insolent and most cruel in their treatment of your good bull Black Butz, and dragged him away toward Clarrie at the run, with a chain to the ring in his nose.”

Lord Bodwy at once rode to Castle Clarrie with Sturdevant, where not for a century had one of the Gosse family come in peace. Lord Loftus received him with courtesy, and Lord Bodwy looked about the great hall of Castle Clarrie

with curiosity, and gave admiration to a fine hanging on the wall.

“I wish this were my only motive for coming,” said Lord Bodwy. “In truth, I am anxious for my bull Black Butz. Sturdevant, tell your story.”

Sturdevant said: “Sir, to make a long story short, yesterday Black Butz was taken from his pasture by four men in Clarrie green.”

Lord Loftus instantly became haughty. “What? Now, in spite of all, you accuse me of stealing your cattle?”

“By no means!” declared Lord Bodwy.

“I give you far more respect than that. But you must agree that the circumstances are most puzzling. Sturdevant clearly saw the Clarrie green on men he could not recognize. The tracks lead into your lands, but fail at the River Swirling.”

“You are at liberty to search my premises, high and low,” declared Sir Loftus in the frostiest of voices. “I will question my herdsmen at once.”

“Sir Loftus, I am far less anxious to find Black Butz than to discover the motives for this peculiar act, and its perpetrators.” Despite many admirable qualities, Sir Loftus lacked easy

adjustment to novel or less-than-obvious ideas. Sir Bodwy's bull had been stolen; Sir Bodwy had come at once to him. The inference was direct: Sir Bodwy thought him a cattle-thief, despite hypocritical pronouncements to the contrary. Sir Loftus was further confounded when Black Butz was discovered in a shed at the back of his barn, slaughtered and drawn.

Transfixed with amazement, Sir Loftus at last found his tongue. He summoned his bailiff and ordered the payment of five silver florins to Sir Bodwy, though he still denied all personal responsibility for the deed.

Bodwy refused to accept the money. “You are clearly not guilty of this act; I could not bring myself to take your money. Instead I will send over a cart for the carcass and tomorrow it shall sing and sizzle on the spit.” On generous impulse he added: “Perhaps you, with others of your household, might care to visit Fian Gosse and join us at the feast. This stange occurrence might thereby have an effect opposite to that which was intended.”

“Sir, what do you mean by that?”

“Do you recall the self-styled Sir Shalles of Dahaut, who so clearly was an agent of Lyonesse?”

“I remember Shalles. The connection with King Casmir is not all so clear.”

“It is, of course, a speculation. I also speculate that Shalles was not the only agent at work here.”

Lord Loftus gave his head a shake of bafflement. “I will make a careful inquiry. Thank you for your invitation, but under the circumstances, while suspicion still hangs over my head, I fear that I must decline.”

“Sir Loftus, I would wager all I own that you are absolutely free of guilt in this episode! I reiterate my invitation: let poor Black Butz, who died an ignoble



death, at least perform a useful post mortem service for both our houses.”

Sir Loftus’ obstinacy was notable; he considered his word, once spoken, to be fixed and irrevocable, thus he might never be accused of fickleness. “Pray excuse me, Sir Bodwy, but I will be uncomfortable until this mystery is fully clarified.”

Lord Bodwy returned to Fian Gosse. Five days passed; then a crofter lad rushed into the presence of Lord Bodwy with ominous news. Fourteen of Lord Loftus’ finest cattle had been stolen by night, and herded south. Crofters had identified the thieves as herdsmen from

Fian Gosse, on the basis of their furtive manner, and because no other folk would be prone to such a deed.

Worse news was yet to come. Slevan Wilding, Loftus' nephew, had followed the tracks into Gosse lands. At a place called Iron Tor, three men-at-arms in Fian Gosse livery loosed a flight of three arrows. Pierced three times, through heart, neck and eye, Slevan Wilding had fallen dead in his tracks. His comrades gave chase to the ambush party, but they were already fled.

Lord Loftus, learning of the ambush and examining the arrows, raised his clenched fists to the sky and sent riders

over the moors and into remote glens to summon the fighting men of Clan Wilding to Castle Clarrie. King's law or none, he vowed to avenge the death of Slevan Wilding and punish those who had stolen his cattle.

Lord Bodwy instantly sent messengers riding at speed for Doun Darric, then made Fian Gosse ready to withstand both assault and siege.

The riders came into Doun Darric on dying horses, arriving at midday. By good fortune a battalion of two hundred horsemen had been ready to ride toward the North Ulfland border, on general maneuvers; Aillas ordered them instead

to Fian Gosse at top speed.

All through the bright afternoon rode the troop, halting at sunset for an hour's rest, then up once more to ride by the light of the full moon: across Bruden Moor, up Werling River Road to Dead Man's Moor, and away at a slant to the northeast. At midnight, winds began gusting and clouds obscured the moon; there was danger of plunging into a bottomless bog or riding headlong into a gully, and the troop took shelter in a spinney of tamarack, to huddle over reeking fires. At dawn the troop rode again, despite a driving wind and spatters of cold rain. With cloaks flapping, they pounded hard up Blue

Murdoch Fell, and galloped under heavy gray clouds by a track across the heather. Two hours into the afternoon they arrived at Fian Gosse-only an hour after the investment of the place by Lord Loftus and his clansmen, in the number of a hundred. For the nonce they had assembled out of arrow range and were occupied at the building of ladders: particularly effective here, since the Fian Gosse walls were low and the defenders few. Lord Loftus doubted nothing but what the place must fall to the first onslaught, which he decided to conduct by the light of the moon.

The appearance of the king's troops and the king himself destroyed his plans, and

instantly he knew the bitterness of total defeat. If blood flowed now, the deepest torrent would be Wilding blood. What now? he asked himself. Withdraw? Fight? Parley? He could see nothing but humiliation.

In dejection and defiance Lord Loftus stood facing the king's troops, helmet thrown back, hands resting on the pommel of his sword, point down in the turf between his feet.

A herald rode forward, dismounted with a brave flourish and faced Lord Loftus. "Sir: I speak with the voice of King Aillas. He commands you to sheath your sword, then come forward and render an

explanation for your presence here.  
What message shall I bear to King  
Aillas?”

Lord Loftus made no reply. With savage force he sheathed his sword and marched across the ground. Aillas dismounted from his horse and stood waiting. All eyes, of the Wilding clansmen, of the Fian Gosse defenders, and of the royal troops, marked his every step.

At Fian Gosse the portcullis creaked up, and Lord Bodwy, with three retainers, came forth, and also approached King Aillas.

Lord Loftus came to a halt ten feet in front of Aillas. In silence, Lord Bodwy came up from the side.

Aillas spoke coldly: “Deliver your sword to Sir Glyn, who stands yonder. You are under arrest, and I charge you with conspiracy to effect an illegal assault and to commit acts of bloody violence.”

Lord Loftus stonily yielded his sword.

Aillas said: “I will listen to your defense.”

First Lord Loftus spoke, then Lord Bodwy, then Loftus once more, and



Bodwy and finally Glannac; and now all the tale was told.

Aillas spoke in a voice more contemptuous than harsh: “Loftus, you are obstinate, over-proud and inflexible. You seem neither cruel nor vicious, merely hot-headed to a foolish degree. Can you gauge your luck that I arrived here when I did, before blood had been let? If a single life had been lost, I would have judged you guilty of murder and hanged you on the instant, and reduced your castle to broken stones.”

“The blood of my nephew Slevan was shed! Who will hang for this crime?”

“Who is the murderer?”

“One of the Gosse.”

“Never!” cried Bodwy. “I am not such a fool!”

“Exactly so,” said Aillas. “Only someone foolishly passionate, such as yourself, would fail to perceive the pattern of this crime, which was calculated to set you at odds and to cause me grief. You have posed me a predicament and I must walk a careful path between wisdom and blind justice, nor do I want to punish foolishness for its own sake. Further, Lord Pirmence gives you a clean bill in the matter of

imprisonment and torture, which weighs heavily in your favor. So then: what assurances can you give that you will never again take up arms to work your private justice, except in self-defense, or in service of the king?”

Lord Loftus blurted: “What assurance can Bodwy give that he will steal no more of my cattle?”

Bodwy gave a laugh of sheer amusement. “Did you steal my bull Black Butz?”

“No, nor would I do such a thing.”

“No more would I steal from your herd.”

Loftus scowled off toward the hills.  
“You claim that this is all a prank?”

“Worse, far worse!” declared Lord Bodwy. “Someone planned that you should invest and overrun Fian Gosse, and then suffer the consequences, to the detriment of me, you, King Aillas and all the land.”

“I see the thrust of your reasoning. Only a madman could conceive a work so cunning!”

“Not a madman,” said Aillas. “Unless Torqual is mad.”

Lord Loftus blinked. ” ‘Torqual’? He is

an outlaw!”

“In the service of Lyonesse. Speak now, Loftus! How will you assure me of your future faith, loyalty and obedience to the laws of the land?”

With poor grace, Lord Loftus knelt and pledged himself to the king’s service, by his honour and the reputation of his house.

“That must suit the case,” said Aillas.  
“Sir Bodwy, what do you say?”

“I have no fault to find, so long as there is an end to suspicion between Wilding and Gosse.”

“Very well, so be it. Sir Glyn, return to Sir Loftus his sword.”

His heart too full for words, Sir Loftus sheathed his sword.

Aillas said: “Our enemy is Torqual. He hides in North Ulfland and comes here to do dark deeds. I doubt not but what he watches at this moment from the mountain or the forest.

I ask that you both learn all you can of him. At this time we cannot enter North Ulfland, lest we provoke the Ska, for which we are not yet ready. Sooner or later, however, they will take heed of us; and I doubt they will consider our

convenience.

“In the meantime, instruct your herdsmen and crofters to keep a sharp watch across the moors. Man, woman or child, whoever helps to trap Torqual, his fortune is made. Make this known, if you will. Also, warn your kin and your clans-folk of Torqual and his tricks.

“Now, Lord Loftus, I cannot let you go scot-free, for the sake of my reputation. First, I place you on probation for five years. Second, I fine you twenty gold crowns, to be paid into the royal treasury. Third, you must host a festival of friendship between your clans, at which no weapons may be displayed,

and only soft words spoken. Let there be music and dancing and an end to the shedding of neighborly blood.”

Lord Bodwy turned to Loftus and extended his arm. “Here is my hand on it.”

Lord Loftus, still somewhat stiff and utterly humiliated, felt a sudden liberation from all which had gone before. In a pulse of generosity as warm as Bodwy’s own, he took the hand and clasped it. “You shall never find me lacking. I hope that we shall be good friends and neighbors.”



NO SOONER HAD AILLAS  
RETURNED to Doun Darric than his  
forebodings were realized in full degree,  
and his previous problems suddenly  
became trivial.

Aillas had long awaited a signal of Ska  
hostility to his rule, if only a skirmish or  
two, to test his mettle. Instead of a  
signal, the Ska dealt him a harsh and  
brutal blow: a challenge which allowed  
him only two responses. He could  
submit, thereby incurring ridicule and  
loss of face, or he could fight, which  
meant lunging into a conflict for which  
he was not yet ready.

The Ska action could not be considered

a surprise. Aillas knew the Ska intimately; they considered themselves at war with the rest of the world, and took advantage of every opportunity to extend the range of their power. Since South Ulfland under King Aillas could only become stronger, his rule must be expunged promptly. As a first step, with minimum expenditure of force and Ska lives, they took the town Suarach on the south bank of the River Werling, hard by the border between the two Ulflands.

The Ska heretofore had left Suarach in peace, to serve as a neutral area where they might trade with the outer world. The town fortifications had long been broken; and Aillas, lacking both funds

and troops for an adequate garrison, perforce had left Suarach undefended, hoping that the Ska would continue to regard the town as a neutral zone.

The Ska, however, moved suddenly, to make their policy in regard to South Ulfland unmistakable; they marched into Suarach with four regiments of mixed cavalry and foot soldiers, and took the town without resistance of any kind.

Immediately they impressed labor gangs from the town's population and, working with that ferocious intensity characteristic of all their conduct, they repaired the fortifications, and Suarach became a mortal insult to Aillas and the

dignity of his rule, which he could not ignore without a sad diminution of prestige.

For two days Aillas kept to his Doun Daric headquarters, calculating his options. An instant counterattack to retake Suarach by frontal assault seemed the least feasible of his choices. The Ska enjoyed short lines of communication; their warriors were superior to the raw Ulfish troops in every category by which soldiery could be measured: training, discipline, leadership, weaponry, and, most telling of all, the almost religious certainty of Ska invincibility. The Troice troops, so Aillas believed, matched the Ska more evenly, but still, in sheer

fighting ability, could not be held equal to the Ska<sup>14</sup>.

Aillas, sitting alone in the cottage which served as his headquarters at Doun Darric, looked out at rain sweeping down across the moor: a dreary view, but no more dismal than his present predicament. If he committed troops, ships and supplies from Troicinet, in quantity sufficient to overwhelm the Ska, he not only risked disaffection at home but he also became exposed to a sudden onslaught by King Casmir of Lyonesse (who in any event would rejoice to discover Aillas trapped in a desperate war with the Ska).

At this moment, the attention of every baron, knight and lordling of South Ulfland was fixed upon him. If he failed to strike back, he lost his credibility as an effective king and became another Oriante, helpless when confronted by Ska force.

Aillas, standing by the window and looking out over the rainswept moor, finally reached a decision-which in fact was not so much a plan of action as a list of responses he must not make: no assault upon Suarach, no reinforcements from Troicinet, except for warships to harass Ska shipping, and no turning his back on the situation as if nothing had happened. So then: what remained? Only

the classical weapons of the underdog: craft and cunning.

What of North Ulfland? The Ska roamed at will, using the region as a wild hinterland which eventually they would occupy. Now they exploited its resources of timber and ore, and impressed the scattered inhabitants into their labor gangs as they found convenient. Across that coastal strip known as “The Foreshore” the Ulfs had been totally expelled. In their stead the Ska had come in numbers to build their curious many-gabled villages and to cultivate not only the fertile acreages but also those ranges which the Ulfs had relegated to grazing land. Elsewhere a

few peasants clustered in squalid villages, hiding at the approach of the Ska press-gangs, even though at Xounges, King Gax still maintained his nominal rule.

Darkness settled over the sodden moor. Aillas was served a supper of bread and lentils, then sat alone by the fire for another two hours before taking to his couch, and eventually the soft sound of rain on the thatch lulled him to sleep.

In the morning by some miracle the sun shone bright from a keen blue sky, and the moors, glistening with sun-struck rain-drops, seemed not so bad a place. Aillas took his breakfast, then



despatched a message to Domreis, commanding that six warships instantly make ready and set sail for Ys, and thereafter scour the Narrow Sea for Ska shipping.

Aillas next met with his military command. He spoke for a period, defining problems and explaining how he hoped to deal with them.

The reaction of his staff surprised and gratified him; indeed, Aillas' concepts coincided generally with their own predispositions. There were even voices raised in full defiance of the Ska: "We have truckled to these black-hearted devils long enough! Now at last we will

show them the stuff that Ulf warriors are made of!”

“They have beat us before, true! And why? Because they are skillfully trained, which gives each man the force of three! Now we too are trained!”

“I say, march now! Full and hard into North Ulfland, then let us seek out their armies! We are not the bleating sheep they take us for!”

Aillas, half-laughing, cried out: “Ah, Sir Redyard! If only the whole army knew your determination! Our problems would be gone! But for the present we must fight with intelligence, rather than

emotion. The Ska's single vulnerability is lack of numbers; they cannot afford large losses, no matter how many they take with them. But I value each of our men no less, and I do not care to trade them lives, especially our two for their one, even if it gains us victory. We must strike like bandits, take our toll, then retreat before suffering harm of our own. The war will be won gradually, but surely. On the other hand, if we attempt to battle the Ska face to face, we play their preferred game, and we shall take many losses and still not win."

"That is a tactful way of putting the facts," Sir Gahaun noted. "Also, since a good half of your soldiers began as

bandits, we can take many a short-cut in their training.”

“Training, always more training,” grumbled Sir Redyard. “When do we fight?”

“Be patient, sir. You shall fight soon enough, I assure you.” A week later a message came to Aillas from Castle Clarrie:

Here is information to interest you. One of my herdsman discovered three of my stolen cattle, high in the foothills, close under Mount Noc. We rode out by stealth and managed, to capture one of the thieves, by reason of an arrow in his

side. Before he died he told us more of Torquat, who now commands a score of cutthroats from AJUJ, an ancient keep in a place coded Devil-shriek Gorge, which is invulnerable to attack. He spends gold for good weapons, and for good food and drink, and it seems that this gold comes, as you averred, from King Casmir of Lyonesse, with whom Torqual maintains communication.

### III

KING CASMIR IT SO HAPPENED, was not altogether pleased with Torqual's efforts. Once again Torqual sent a messenger demanding gold, and

on this occasion King Casmir had asked for an accounting of funds already spent and results already achieved. "I am not convinced that my moneys are being spent efficiently," said King Casmir. "In sheer point of fact, my informants tell me that Torqual's style of living approaches luxury, and that he and his company of cutthroats dine on the best the land has to offer. Is my gold spent thus, on sweetmeats and raisin-cakes?"

"And why not?" demanded the messenger. "Our bolt-hole is Ang, offers little more comfort than a pile of stones. Are we to starve while doing your work? When rain blows through the windows and the fire gutters for lack of

dry fuel, Torqual can at least offer his band the solace of good food and wine!”

Casmir grudgingly paid out another twenty crowns, with instruction to Torqual that he learn to live off the country. “I suggest that he plant vacant lands to oats and barley, and that he keep cattle and sheep, and run fowl, as do the other denizens of the region, and so mitigate this remorseless erosion of my treasury.”

“Sir, with the fullest respect for your wisdom, we can grow neither oats nor barley on vertical surfaces of stone, nor will cattle thrive in these areas.”

While unconvinced, King Casmir said no more.

Several months went by, while events of importance occurred in the Ulflands.

Secret despatches from Doun Darric and elsewhere made no mention of Torqual, and King Casmir could only speculate as to Torqual's work.

The messenger at last returned, and again required gold: on this occasion in the amount of fifty crowns.

For once King Casmir's icy composure failed him; his jaw dropped in amazement. "Have I heard you aright?"



“Sir, if you have grasped the figure ‘fifty crowns,’ you have heard me aright. The company at Ang now numbers twenty-two strong warriors, who must be fed, clothed and armed during all seasons. Our other sources of revenue are failing us; meanwhile Torqual recuperates from a wound. He sends this message: ‘If I am to maintain my force and work in your service, I must have gold!’”

King Casmir sighed and shook his head. “You shall have no more of mine-not till I see evidence that your work is worth its cost. Can you supply this information? No? .... Rosko! This gentleman is departing.”

Toward evening of this same day Rosko, one of King Casmir's underchamberlains, using a nasal voice of deprecation, announced to King Casmir that a certain Visbhume demanded private audience.

"Bring him in," said King Casmir curtly. Visbhume entered, thrusting past the startled Rosko and advancing with a dancing tip-toe stride of pent energy released. As before he wore a rusty black cloak and, today, a black long-billed hunter's cap, which, with his darting black eyes, long crooked nose and forward-leaning posture, gave him a look of eager curiosity. He halted close to King Casmir, doffed his hat, then,

showing an arch and confidential smile, performed a bow of several flourishes.

King Casmir pointed to a seat at some distance; Visbhume's breath was far from fresh.

Visbhume seated himself with the easy attitude of a man who has done his job well. King Casmir dismissed Rosko with a wave, then asked Visbhume: "What is your news?"

"Sir, I have learned much!"

"Speak, then."

"Despite my dread of the cruel sea, I

crossed the Lir in all bravery, as befits the private agent of your Majesty!”

Visbhume saw no need to mention that he had spent the better part of a month inspecting the vessels which plied the Lir, hoping to learn which offered the speediest, most secure and most comfortable passage.

Visbhume spoke on. “When service or duty is the call, then I respond with the insensate certainty of the rising sun!”

“That is good to hear,” said King Casmir.

“Upon my arrival at Domreis, I took

lodging at the Black Eagle Inn, which I conceived to be-”

King Casmir raised his hand. “You need not describe each incident; merely describe your findings.”

“As you wish, sir. After a month or more of extremely subtle investigations, I learned the general area of Ehirme’s present residence. I made my way to this locality, and there, after weeks of further inquiry, I discovered the houses of both Ehirme and her parents.

“To my surprise I found that Ehirme’s sister had exaggerated not at all. These folk have been accorded the condition of

gentry, and live in luxury, with servants to sweep the hearth and scour the doorstep. It is now ‘Dame Ehirme’ to all the world, and her spouse is ‘Squire Dikken.’ Her parents are ‘the Right Honourable Graithe and Dame Wynes.’ There is clear glass in their windows and four chimneys to their roofs, and you cannot see the ceiling to their kitchens for the sausages.”

“That is an extraordinary elevation of place,” said King Casmir. “Proceed, with somewhat greater compression of the weeks and months; otherwise we will be sitting here an exactly equal period of time.”

“Your Majesty, I will be brief, even terse! Local inquiry yielded nothing germane to our interest, so I decided to put my questions directly to Dame Ehirme. Here I found difficulty, as she cannot speak with clarity.”

“I cut her tongue in half,” said King Casmir.

“Here is the explanation! Her spouse is surly, and as chary of words as a dead fish, and I took my questions to Graithe and Wynes, where I again encountered offensive taciturnity. But now I was prepared and in the guise of a wine merchant I poured them a libation which made them docile, and they babbled all

they knew.” Visbhume jerked his head and grinned widely at the recollection.

King Casmir waited, making no comment, until, at last, Visbhume gave over his pleasant memories.

“Ah, what a triumph!” Visbhume declared. “And now hear this news! The child originally brought out to Graithe and Wynes was a boy! When they carried the basket into the woods one day, the fairies of Thripsey Shee took the boy and left a girl. The changeling is the Princess Madouc!”

King Casmir closed his eyes and held them shut for ten seconds, but otherwise



evinced no emotion, and when he spoke his voice was even as ever. “And the boy?”

“They never saw him after, near or far.”

King Casmir spoke softly, as if only for the hearing of his own ears: “Persilian revealed truth, more than I could guess!”

Visbhume assumed an air of judicious wisdom, as might befit the king’s trusted adviser. King Casmir appraised him for a long moment, then said in the mildest of voices: “You have spoken of this matter to whom? Tamurello?”

“To no person whatever, save yourself!

That is the way of discretion!”

“You have done well.”

Visbhume jumped to his feet. “Thank you, your Majesty! What is to be my reward? I hope for a pleasant estate.”

“In due course. First we must pursue this matter to its ultimate.”

Visbhume spoke hollowly: “You refer to the boy?”

“Of course. He would now be five years old; perhaps he still abides with the fairies.”

Visbhume screwed up his face. “Not

likely. They are prone to fads and foibles. Their enthusiasms never persist. The boy long since has been thrust out into the forest, and most likely devoured by wild animals.”

“This I doubt. The boy must be found, identified, and brought here to Haidion. This is of paramount urgency. Do you know the location of Thripsey Shee?”

“Sir, I do not.”

King Casmir smiled a grim smile.

“Clearly, it is close by the old residence of Graithe and Wynes-which is to say, beyond the village Glymwode, at the edge of the forest. Find the shee and put

your questions to the fairies. Subdue them with a libation of docility, if necessary.”

Visbhume uttered a high-pitched sound of dismay. “Your Majesty, a word!”

King Casmir, slowly turning his head, fixed Visbhume with a stare cold and blue as a glacial lake. “You have further information to impart?”

“No, your Majesty. I must think long and well on how best to fulfill your goals.”

“Waste no time. This matter is of great importance... . Why do you wait?”

“Your Majesty, I have needs.”

“In what regard?”

“Certainly I will require a steed suitable to my condition, as well as a sum of money, for needful expenses.”

“Make your application to Rosko; he will deal with your requests.”<sup>7</sup>

## IV

THE SFER ARCT, ENTERING LYONESSE TOWN from the north, skirted the most ancient wing of Haidion, then continued across town to the Chale, the esplanade fronting the

harbour. At this intersection stood the Four Mallows Inn, where Visbhume took lodging, in apparent disregard of King Casmir's order to make haste.

Visbhume dined upon a fine fresh lobster, seethed in a sauce of wine, butter and garlic, and consumed a bottle of the best wine the inn could offer. Despite the succulence of his meal, he ate without gusto, in a mood of dour foreboding. If he were to approach the fairies and annoy them with his questions, they would surely play him a round of vicious pranks-especially since they delighted in tormenting folk in whom they detected fear and loathing: both of which Visbhume felt in

abundance.

After finishing his supper, Visbhume went to sit on a bench at the side of the square and while dusk fell upon the town he brooded further upon his mission. If only he had worked to better effect during his apprenticeship to Hippolito! But he had attempted only easy techniques and had never encompassed the hard disciplines required for full command of the Grand Art. When fleeing Maule in the goat-cart, he had sequestered certain of Hippolito's properties: apparatus, books, curios, and his great prize, Twitten's Almanac. He had taken these goods to a secret place in Dahaut where now they were of no

use to him, and he knew none of the sleights of quick self-transfer.

Visbhume scratched his long nose. Fast travel was a lore which he must inveigle from Tamurello, when circumstances were favorable. To date, Tamurello had revealed nothing whatever; indeed his attitude was often ambiguous, and his tart comments had hurt Visbhume deeply, so that now Visbhume felt reluctant to seek help from Tamurello for fear of another hurtful rebuff.

Yet, where else could he turn? The fairies were the most capricious of creatures; to win their favor, or to gain their knowledge, one must entertain



them, or delight their senses, or arouse their avarice, or perhaps only their curiosity. Or their fear.

Visbhume reflected at length, to no effect, and presently went to his couch.

In the morning, he attacked his quandary again. "I am Visbhume!" he told himself. "I am the clever, the clear-eyed, the bold! I am Visbhume the magician who pipes up the dawn and marches through life with his forehead wreathed in rainbows, riding the surge of a glorious music!"

But then, using another voice, he told himself: "Quite so and all very well, but

in the present case, exactly how shall I exercise my power?”

No response vouchsafed itself, from either of the voices. Halfway through the morning, as he sat on the bench, he was approached by a burly black-bearded Moor garbed in turban and djellaba. The Moor stood looking down at him with quizzical amusement and presently said: “So then, Visbhume! How goes it?”

Visbhume looked up sharply, then said: “Sir, you have the advantage of me. Are we truly acquainted?”

The Moor chuckled. “Ask yourself, Visbhume, who knows of your presence

in Lyonesse Town?”

“They are three: King Casmir, his servant Rosko, and a certain other person whose name need not be mentioned, by reason of discretion.”

“Might ‘Tamurello’ be the name which, in your wise restraint, you do not choose to mention?”

“Precisely so.” Visbhume studied the black-bearded face. “This is an unfamiliar semblance.”

Tamurello nodded. “As a matter of fact, it is close to my natural likeness, and therefore comfortable. You seem to be at

loggerheads. What is your difficulty?”

Visbhume explained his problem in all frankness. “King Casmir commands that I draw information from the fairies, and I sit here among a dozen procedures, none of which serve the purpose. If truth be known, I fear fairy-tricks. They will transform me into a heron, or pull my nose out a clothyaid’s length, or send me riding across the sky in a whirlwind.”

“The dangers are real,” said Tamurello. “To avoid them you must use the skill of a lover with his coy mistress, or else seduce them with marvels.”

“All very well,” bleated Vishbume, “but

how?" Tamurello looked off across the harbour. After a moment he said: "Go to the market, and buy eight skeins of red yarn and eight skeins of blue yarn, and bring them here; then we shall see."

Visbhume marched swiftly away to do Tamurello's bidding. He returned to find Tamurello sitting at his ease on the bench. Visbhume started to sit also, but Tamurello made a signal. "There is room only for one. You may sit presently. Show me the yarn... . Aha, that will do splendidly. You must wind the red yarn into a ball, and the blue yarn into another ball. I have here a bobbin apparently carved from a maple burl; observe it, if you will." Tamurello

exhibited an object about two inches in diameter. “You will notice that it is perforated by a hole, and indeed is not truly made of wood.”

“What then might it be?”

“A clever little creature which has received my instructions. Now listen with all attention! Do exactly as I say; otherwise you must come to grief, and fly Madling Meadow as a heron or, more likely, a crow; the fairies at times are over-mordant in their humour.”

“You need never worry; when I listen I hear and what I hear I retain forever, since my memory is like a record carved

into stone!”

“A useful trait. Go to Madling Meadow, and show yourself about two hours after sunrise. At the center of the meadow you will notice a hummock. From its side grows a crooked old oak tree. This is Thripsey Shee.

“Go out on the meadow, heeding neither sounds, nor yet blows, tweaks, nor pinches: they are meaningless. The fairies idly amuse themselves, and will not truly harm you, unless you give them reason, by kicking or cursing or simply glaring about. Go with pleasant dignity, and in their curiosity they will not think even to harass you.

“When you arrive at the crooked oak tree, tie one end of the red yarn to a branch, then come back toward a pair of birch saplings, trading the red yarn along the meadow behind you.

“Arriving at the birch saplings, toss the ball of red yarn between the trunks. Do not walk through yourself. Then thread the end of the blue yarn through the hole in the bobbin and knot it, so that it will not pull through. Toss the blue yarn after the red, then utter the words which I will now teach you.” Tamurello spoke aside to the bobbin: “Do not heed me now; I speak in rehearsal only. Visbhume, attention! At the proper time, utter this charge: ‘Bobbin, be at your business!’



Then stand back. Do not watch the bobbin; do not look between the trees. Is so much clear?"

"Absolutely, and in every respect. What then?"

"I cannot predict. If the fairies ask questions you must say: 'Who talks? Show yourself; no wise man reveals his wisdom to the air!' Then, after they show themselves you must deny knowledge of the shee, so that they may not accuse you of special purpose. When they ask what you have wrought, you must say: 'This is a nexus into Hai-Hao, but nothing can pass without my permission.'"

“Is this truly so?” asked Visbhume, charmed by the wonderful concept.

“What matters is, will the fairies believe you? The question is nuncupatory.”

“Suppose in all innocence I should swindle them, and they remember and send out owls to haunt me, as they did poor Tootleman of Hoar Hill?”

“The point is well taken! However, the nexus is real but perdurable only so long as the wind allows.”

Visbhume asked further questions, exploring contingencies until at last Tamurello grew restive, and rose to

depart.

“One last matter!” cried Visbhume. “If they will respond to my questions, perhaps they will grant me other favors, such as a Hat of Wisdom, or Fast Shoes, or a Purse of Plenty to supply my needs.”

“Ask as you like,” said Tamurello, smiling in a manner which Visbhume felt might be somewhat contemptuous. “A word of caution, however: the fairies are notably unsympathetic in regard to greed.” With this, Tamurello rose from the bench and strolled away, across the square and up the Sfer Arct.

Visbhume looked darkly after him. Tamurello's manner was not always gracious and kindly, as befitted a true comrade. ... Ah well, when all was said and done, Tamurello was no doubt a worthy fellow. One must be prepared for quirks and crotchets; that was indeed the essence of friendship.

The day being still young, Visbhume also set off up the Sfer Arct. At Haidion he sought out Resko the underchamberlain. "I am the gentleman Visbhume. His Majesty has granted me a purse of gold and silver coins, a horse of fine quality, with proper furniture, and all else needful. By the king's command, you are instructed to fulfill these

requirements.”

“Wait here,” said Rosko. “I must verify every detail of this request.”

“That is insulting!” stormed Visbhume.

“I shall report you to King Casmir!”

“Report away!” said Rosko and went off to instruct the groom.

An hour later Visbhume rode north from Lyonesse Town astride a stately white mare with a wide rump and a hanging head. In a strident and reedy voice of outrage, Visbhume had demanded of the groom a mount of braver mettle: “Must I fare forth on the king’s business like

some lumpkin out to deliver a sack of turnips? Is there no pride in the stables of Haidion, that they furnish sway-backed nags to gentlemen?"

The groom tapped his ears, to indicate what Visbhume half-suspected to be feigned deafness; in any event, Visbhume was forced to accept the proffered mount, nor did his purse reveal the warm shine of gold.

Coming into Old Street, he turned eastward and rode until sunset, arriving at the village Pinkersley where he took lodging at the Fox and Grapes. On the following day, he came to Little Saffield, and at the crossroad turned

north. He passed the night in Tawn Timble, and the next day proceeded to Glymwode. During the afternoon he reconnoitered the neighborhood, and by dint of careful questions, learned the location of Madling Meadow, a mile along a woodcutter's track into the Forest of Tantrevalles. Visbhume returned to Glymwode and passed the night at the Yellow Man Inn.

Early in the morning Visbhume set forth riding up the woodcutter's lane and presently came to Madling Meadow. He alighted and tied his horse to a tree, then, standing in the forest shade, surveyed the meadow. He perceived a scene of bucolic peace, with no sound but the

hum of insects. Buttercups, daisies, mallows, cornflowers and a dozen other flowers spotted the green grass with colour. In the soft blue sky floated a few puffs of white cloud. At the center of the meadow rose a hummock on which grew a gnarled old oak. No living creature could be seen.

Visbhume readied his balls of yarn, then, stepping forward from the concealment of the forest shade, walked out into the sunlight. The silence seemed even more intense than before.

Visbhume marched confidently across the meadow, looking neither right nor left. At the hummock he halted and now



something tugged at his cloak. Visbhume paid no heed. He brought out the ball of red yarn and tied an end to a low branch of the old oak.

From behind the hummock came a small mewling laugh, quickly stifled. Visbhume seemed not to hear. He turned about and, paying out the red yarn, walked back toward two young birch saplings not far from the edge of the meadow. At his back came a rustling sound, and muted whispers. Visbhume seemed to hear nothing. Again something tugged at his cloak; as before Visbhume paid no heed, and continued across the meadow leaving the red strand behind him. He stopped in front of the birch saplings and

sent the ball of red yarn, now somewhat depleted, rolling between. He brought out the blue yarn, and, following Tamurello's instructions, attached the bobbin to the yarn. He rolled the blue yarn after the red, tossed the bobbin into the air and cried out: "Bobbin, be at your business!"

Mindful of Tamurello's list of heeds and cautions, Visbhume danced on nimble long legs off to the side and away from the birches. With eyes half-closed and mouth pursed in a beatific smile, Visbhume gazed benignly across the meadow, while from somewhere beyond the scope of his vision came a shrill keening sound, as of an awl drawn

smartly along a taut wire.

Visbhume's narrow shoulder-blades twitched and crawled for curiosity, but even more intense was the emotion of fear; he hunched down his neck as a dog might draw its tail between its legs. "A sorry fool I would be to ignore the admonitions!" So Visbhume told himself. "And, more than all else, I am not a fool!"

Something kicked at his lean shank. Visbhume paid no heed. A pair of fingers tweaked his buttocks, provoking from Visbhume both a startled squeak and a reflexive jerk, which evoked a sputter of quiet titters.

Indignant words rose to Visbhume's lips; the fairies were taking overly broad liberties with his person... Visbhume stalked ten paces to the side. Half-turning, he glanced across Madling Meadow and, marvel of marvels! Through bright mist swirling around the hummock he glimpsed a wonderful structure of jet and milk-glass. Slender columns supported domes and tall arcades and higher domes, and still more, ranked one above the other, along with a hundred terraces and balconies and, higher yet, a cluster of towers flying pennons and banderoles. In the shadowed halls hung chandeliers encrusted with diamonds and

moonstones, which gave off glints of red, blue, green and purple light. ... So much Visbhume thought to see, but as soon as he tried to trace out a form in all clarity, it swam away into the mist.

Other shapes blurred in and out of focus. The strand of red yarn which Visbhume had laid across the meadow he now apprehended as a fairy avenue of polished red porphyry, between a pair of splendid balustrades. Along this avenue fairies ran back and forth, testing the footing, pointing first to the bobbin's pattern, then to the shee. Others ran and hopped and performed foolish antics on the top of the balustrades, and all seemed to approve this marvellous

novelty. At closer hand, arranged in solemn contemplation of the bobbin's work, sat clusters of fairies, quarreling, nudging and teasing, or simply frolicking among the grasses, but, most of all, they pondered the pattern created by the bobbin, which held a whole throng caught up in wonder. From the corner of his eye and almost beyond his volition, Visbhume sensed a most peculiar configuration, which even at a fleeting glimpse fascinated his mind.

A voice spoke, thin and clean "Low human fellow, mortal fellow, intrusive fellow: why do you do what you have done?"

Visbhume looked here and there, feigning bewilderment. He spoke as if apostrophizing the sky: “How oddly the winds rustle the leaves! Almost I thought to hear a voice! Ah, voice of the wind, speak and tell me of your wild roaming! Speak, wind!”

“Fool! The wind speaks no words!”

“I heard a voice! Voice, did you speak? If so, be brave! Show yourself, as I cannot compromise myself at random.”

“Look then, mortal, and see what you see.”

The mists swirled away from the

hummock, revealing the full splendour of the fairy castle. A host of fairies surrounded Visbhume, some sitting, others hiding in the grass. At a distance of twenty feet stood King Throbius and Queen Bossum, in full regalia. Throbius wore a crown worked from sceleone, that fragile metal forged from water-reflected gleams of moonlight. Slender cusps surrounding the crown terminated in pale blue sapphires. The robes of Throbius were blue velvet woven from the bloom of willow catkins; they trailed ten feet behind him and were carried by six roundfaced skew-eyed implings, smirking sidelong with noses wrinkled. Some lagged, others tugged at the robe to bring up the laggards; sometimes they



played a sly game of tug-of-war with the train, always with one eye on Throbius, the better to avoid his chastisement should their game be detected.

Queen Bossum's robes were a saffron yellow, rich as new butter, and her crown was set with topaz prisms. Her train was carried by girl-imps, whose conduct was primly correct, while they watched the antics of Throbius' implings sidelong with haughty disapproval.

Directly in front of King Throbius and Queen Bossum stood Brean the Royal Herald, who spoke again, in a voice now shrill and clear. "Mortal fellow, do you know that you trespass upon

Madling Meadow? Behold their Majesties King Throbius and Queen Bossum! Explain to the royal ears and to those of the assembled notables the purpose of your investiture here on this meadow, which we include in our domain!”

Visbhume performed a bow of six flourishes. “Inform their Majesties of my pride and delight that they have deigned to notice my little concatenation, which in fact is a nexus unto Hai-Hao.”

The herald spoke the message; King Throbius responded and the herald turned back to Visbhume. “The Magnificences wish to learn your name

and your worldly status, that they may justly assess your conduct, and mete out the penalty for your offense, if offense it be.”

‘Offense’? Surely here is no guilt whatever!” cried Visbhume in poignant contralto tones. Is this not Stangle<sup>15</sup> Meadow, where I may test my wonderful nexus?”

“Foolish mortal! You have compounded your solecism! Such words are not to be uttered in the presence of the Sempitemals; it is considered in poor taste. Secondly, this is not Stangle Meadow, but rather the halcyon Madling Meadow, and before you is Thripsey

Shee.”

“Ah! It seems that I have blundered, and for this my apologies. I know of Thripsey Shee and its remarkable folk; did they not even provide the royal house of Lyonesse with the Princess Madouc?”

Brean the herald looked uncertainly toward King Throbius who signaled to Visbhume. “Mortal, come forward. Why have you established your nexus on our meadow?”

“Sire, I seem to have wandered astray; the nexus was not intended for Madling Meadow, despite its many fascinations.

But I wonder of the boy whom you nurtured so wisely five years ago; where is he now? I would speak with him.”

“What boy is this?” Then, after Queen Bossum whispered in his ear: “He is gone; he is away through the forest. We know nothing of him.”

“That is a pity; I have long felt curiosity on his account.”

To the side stood a fairy with a boy’s body and a girl’s face, who scratched himself incessantly: head, belly, leg, buttock, nose, elbow, neck. Looking up from his scratching he took time to call out: “It was that little braggart we called

Tippet! Ah, but I punished him properly, with a fine mordet!<sup>16</sup>”

King Throbius spoke to the side. “Where is good Skepe of the long arm?”

“I am here, Sire.”

“Cut a fine switch and dust Falael’s breeches with three and one-half smart celebrations.”

Falael instantly set up a howling outcry. “Let fairness prevail! I spoke only truth!”

“Hereafter, when you speak truth, use less gusto and vainglory. Your mordet

caused our humiliation! You must learn tact!”

“Ah, your Majesty, I have already been taught tact by your august example! Perhaps I already know too much, so that I cloak my awe at your Majesty’s transcendent might with a possibly all too transparent film of bravado! I beg that you re-instruct Skepe from his work!”

From everywhere around the meadow came a thoughtful and approving murmur, and even King Throbius was affected. “Well spoken, Falael! Skepe, diminish by one full stroke your effort!”

Falael called out: “That is good news, your Majesty, but still it is only a start! May I continue my remarks?”

“I have heard enough.”

“In that case, Sire, I will say no more, especially if you will agree to mitigate my itch.”

“Impossible. The itch shall proceed, in order to cure that waspish malice which has wearied so many of us.”

Visbhume called out: “Your Majesty, if you will allow me a word aside with Falael, I believe that I can persuade him to remorse.”



King Throbius stroked his fine green-gold beard. “That would seem a kindly act, and surely could do no harm.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.” Visbhume signaled to Falael. “Step over here, if you will.”

Falael dealt with an itch under his left arm-pit, then followed Visbhume to a place somewhat aside. “Mind you, I will hear no preachments and if you touch me with a Christian cross, I will transform all your teeth into barnacles.”

Skepe spoke hopefully to King Throbius: “If I find them standing properly side by side, may I come up quietly behind and

catch them two at a blow?”

King Throbius reflected, then signified in the negative. “Your switch is far too short.”

Visbhume, overhearing the conversation, took pains to stand with Skepe in his range of vision. He spoke in low tones to Falael: “I will intercede for you with King Throbius if you satisfy my curiosity in regard to the boy Tippet, although naturally I cannot promise that he will heed my advice.”

Falael laughed scornfully. “You will do well to intercede for yourself. I believe that you are to be transformed into a

night-crake.”

“Not so! I am assured of this! Tell me of the boy Tippet.”

“There is little to tell. He was obnoxious and vain; I was instrumental in expelling him from the shee.”

“Where then did he go?”

“Off into the forest, but then there was more. Rhodion, Monarch of All Fairies, with great injustice dissolved my mordet and gave the girl Glyneth the power of speech with animals, while I was rendered only this offensive itch.”

“Glyneth, you say. And then?”

“I paid no heed, for my own troubles were on me. If you must know more, go to the girl Glyneth.”

“And who was the boy’s father, and who the mother?”

“Woodcutters, peasants, simple human folk. Bother me no more, as I know no more!” Falael made as if to turn away, but was delayed by a severe itching of the groin.

Visbhume cried out: “But where is the boy now? How is he known?”

“I care not a whit, and I hope not to see him again, for I should surely do him a mischief and suffer new vexations in consequence. Now then, intercede for me, as you promised. If you fail, I will visit a mordet upon you!”

“I can only do my best.” Visbhume turned back to face King Throbius, “Your Majesty, I find that Falael is basically congenial. He has been misled by his companions, who have brought him into disgrace. As a disinterested party, before I remove the nexus and causeway from your domain, I wish to urge that your Majesty on this occasion temper justice with mercy.”

“It is a large demand which you make of me,” said King Throbius.

“True, but since Falael feels true remorse, further demonstration of your displeasure must be futile.”

“A favor for a favor,” said King Throbius. “I agree to forgive Falael and in return you must leave your fascinating nexus here on Madling Meadow.”

Visbhume bowed. “Your Majesty has spoken; I am in accord.”

The company of fairies gave a great yelping chortle of delight for the victory astute King Throbius had won over the

peculiar mortal; there was capering, somersaults, clicking of the heels in mid-air and small joyous jigs.

Visbhume bowed low. “Your Majesty, though I have surrendered my valuable nexus, it has been in a good cause and now I crave your leave to depart.”

“First things first,” said King Throbius. “A single matter hangs in the air. Skepe, administer three and one-half strokes minus one stroke to Falael, as specified.”

“Your Majesty!” cried Visbhume in shock. “It was precisely this beating which you agreed to spare poor Falael!”

“Not so! I agreed to forgive Falael, which I have done, fully and freely. The beating will be for other pranks which have gone undetected and which Falael no doubt richly deserves.”

“Would this guilt not be cancelled by your forgiveness?”

“Perhaps so, but a weight still hangs in the air. Two and one-half strokes have been ordained; they must be effected. Since you have forfended these strokes from Falael, the logic of circumstances diverts them to your own crawling hide. Dango, Pume, Thwither: down with Visbhume’s breeches; let him hold his backside at the ready. Now then, Skepe:



do your duty!”

“Ai hi yi!” cried Visbhume.

“One!”

“Ai-ee ha!”

“Two!”

“Oo-oh! Oo-ha! .... Zappir tzung muig lenka! Groagha teka!<sup>17</sup> But the half was stronger than the two full strokes together!”

“Yes, that is sometimes implicit in the nature of things,” King Throbius agreed.  
“But no matter; you have had your way

and Falael has been reprieved, though I am not sure of his remorse. See how he sits yonder on a post, grinning for sheer joy!”

Visbhume, after regaining his dress, bowed once again. “Your Majesty, I leave you to the enjoyment of your nexus.”

“You have my leave to go. I must investigate this fascinating nexus.”

Visbhume set off across the meadow, looking back over his shoulder. King Throbius slowly advanced to stand in front of the nexus, then took a slow step forward, and another... .

Visbhume turned and looked no more until he reached the forest shade.

Madling Meadow was as he had first seen it. The hummock supported only a gnarled old oak. Between the birches hung a tangle of blue and red yarn, which jerked and bounced and gathered itself into a sort of cocoon... . Visbhume untied his horse with trembling fingers, mounted and departed at speed.

V

ARRIVING IN LYONESSE TOWN, Visbhume went directly to Haidion, and on this occasion it was Sir Mungo, the

High Seneschal himself, who took him to the terrace before the royal bedchamber, where King Casmir sat cracking and eating walnuts.

At King Casmir's signal, Sir Mungo haughtily arranged a chair for the use of Visbhume, who pulled it up even closer to the table. King Casmir paused in his cracking of walnuts to turn Visbhume a mild blue gaze of mingled distaste and curiosity. "You have just arrived?"

"I have barely dismounted from my horse, your Majesty! I come in haste to report my findings."

King Casmir spoke over his shoulder to

the footman: "Serve us tankards of ale; these nuts give me a thirst, and Visbhume will surely wish to wash the dust from his throat." The footman departed. "Sir Mungo, I will not need you... . Now then, Visbhume, what is your news?"

Visbhume hitched his chair even closer. "By dint of the most crafty effort I managed to draw information from a class of creature whose most joyous habit is to outwit mortal men! But I dazzled them all and they told me this: the boy whom they called Tippet had been turned out from the shee at some indefinite time in the past, whereupon he seems to have become the companion of a girl named Glyneth, and here is the

core of my information.”

The footman brought tankards foaming with beer along with a plate of biscuits. Without waiting for King Casmir’s invitation, Visbhume seized one of the tankards and drank a deep draught.

“Most interesting,” said King Casmir.

Visbhume leaned forward to rest an elbow on the table. “Now then: who is Glyneth? Can it be the Princess Glyneth of Troicinet, who occupies so anomalous a place in the court at Miraldra? Remember that Ehirme, Graithe and Wynes, all in some way associated with the boy Tippet, have

removed to Troicinet, where now they prosper. Here is more of the same!”

“Your deductions would seem sound.”

King Casmir drank from his tankard, then brushed walnut shells to the floor, to find room to rest his own elbow. “The boy would now be five years old<sup>18</sup>. It must be that he too resides in Troicinet. But where? With Ehirme?”

“There is no such child at Ehirme’s house: I can vouch for this.”

“What of Graithe and Wynes?”

“I observed them for several days. They live alone.” Partly to escape Visbhume’s

conspiratorial nearness, King Casmir rose to his feet and went to stand by the balustrade, which allowed him a sweeping view over the roofs of Lyonesse Town and their tiles of earthen colours, the harbour and the sweep of the Lir. He looked back toward Visbhume, "There is at least an open avenue of inquiry."

Visbhume, coining to stand beside King Casmir, looked dubiously off across the Lir. "You refer to the Princess Glyneth?"

"Who else? You must return to Troicinet and discover what she knows. She is a maiden of charm and grace, with an amiable disposition and seemingly a



confiding nature.”

“Have no fear on that score! She will answer my questions in full detail! If she attempts reticence, so much the better! I am never averse to persuading young girls and forcing them to obedience. Here is where work becomes pleasure!”

King Casmir eyed Visbhume coldly sidelong. From time to time he gratified his taste for boys of a certain manner and conformation; otherwise he eschewed the licentious excesses which enlivened King Audry’s court at Avallon. “I trust that in your transports you will not forget the purpose of the inquiry.”

“Have no fear! Difficulties vanish when I bring my little techniques to bear. Where would Glyneth now be found?”

“At Miraldra, so I suppose, or else at Watershade.”

## VI

VISBHUME TOOK LODGING ONCE AGAIN at the Four Mallows. He dined early, then went out upon the square, to sit on the same bench as before. But on this evening no burly Moor approached him, nor Tamurello in any of his other guises.

Visbhume watched the sun setting into

the Lir. A breeze from the west had blown up trains of steep waves, each with a crest of white foam, and Visbhume turned away with a shudder. Were Tamurello truly a good and faithful comrade, he would have provided Visbhume means of quick transit from place to place, so that Visbhume might travel without suffering the heaving, sliding, toppling, wallowing motion of a ship, nor yet the staid gait of a sway-backed white mare.

Visbhume reflected upon the cache of magical apparatus which he had stored in Dahaut. Some of the simpler items functioned in a manner which he understood. Others, like Twitten's

Almanac, might well respond to his closer investigation. The use of other objects and adjuncts remained beyond his present capabilities. Still, who could say? Among these items might be an effectuant to provide Visbhume the swift and easy transit for which he yearned so deeply,

Visbhume came to a firm decision. In the morning, instead of taking ship for Troicinet, as King Casmir might well have preferred, he rode up the Sfer Arct to the north, then off at a slant to Old Street, then east to Icniel Way, north through Pomperol into Dahaut. Arriving at the village Glimwillow, he went to a secret place and retrieved the large

brass-bound chest containing the goods which he had taken away from Maule.

Visbhume lodged himself in a private chamber at the Sign of the Mandrake, and for three days worked among the contents of the chest. When at last he returned south along Icniel Way, he carried a yellow leather wallet containing a variety of those articles he deemed most accessible to his use, and a few others of fascinating potentiality, like Twitten's Almanac. He found no obvious device or method by which he might be conveyed at speed directly to Troicinet, or elsewhere, and so rode the stately white mare as before. At Slute Skeme he sold the white mare and with

many misgivings took passage aboard a lumbering cargo vessel bound for Domreis.

Three days of cautious inquiry at last yielded information that, in the absence of Prince Dhrun-now making a ceremonial visit to Dascinet-the Princess Glyneth had taken herself off to Watershade.

In the morning Visbhume set off along the coast road. A storm of roaring winds and driving rain persuaded him to break his journey at the town Hag's Head, under Cape Haze, where he took lodging at the Three Lampreys. To pass the time he composed himself to a study of

Twitten's Almanac, and became so enthralled by the vistas of opportunity suddenly displayed before his imagination that he extended his visit another day, and yet another, and another, even though the weather had once again become fine.

Meanwhile, the Three Lampreys was comfortable and convenient; Visbhume ate well, drank well, and sat long hours in the sunshine, pondering Twitten's wonderful calculations and the no less remarkable conversion of theory into fact. Visbhume called for ink, quill and parchment, and attempted calculations of his own, to the wondering curiosity of others at the inn, who at last decided him

to be an astrologer calculating the moods, surges and retrogressions of the several planets: a conjecture which pleased Visbhume and which he took no pains to disabuse.

Visbhume enjoyed other activities as well. He dozed in the sunlight, took short strolls along the shore, and tried to induce the serving maids to accompany him on these strolls. He was especially interested in the flaxen-haired butter-and-milk girl, whose body, despite her youth, had started to show a number of appealing aspects.

Visbhume's interest in her attributes became so forthright that the innkeeper



came out to chide him: “You, sir, I must ask you to mend your ways! These little maids do not know how to cope with your lewdness. I have told them to throw a good drench of cold water on you if you fondle them again.”

Visbhume said haughtily: “Fellow, you are presuming far out of your place!”

“That is as may be. In any case, let us have no more of your leers and probing fingers and invitations down the shore.”

“This is sheer insolence!” stormed Visbhume. “Be warned! I am almost prompted to take my custom elsewhere!”

“Do as you like; there will be no grief at Three Lampreys! Truth to tell, with your constant tapping and prancing of the feet, you are alarming my regulars; they think you a natural and as I reflect on it, so do I. By the statutes of law I cannot turn you out unless you commit a nuisance, and you have veered yourself very close. Beware!”

Visbhume declared in all dignity:

“Innkeeper, you are surly and dull. The girls enjoy my little play; if not, they would never come so often, lilting and tittling, flirting and showing their things; just so.”

“Aha! You will find how they like it

when they cool your play with good cold water. Meanwhile, you may also pay your score as of this moment, in case you become suddenly indignant and prance off by night.”

“That is a churlish remark to make to a gentleman!”

“No doubt. I am careful never to do so.”

“You have offended me,” said Visbhume. “I will pay the score and depart your premises at once. As for your gratuity, expect not even a groat.”

Visbhume departed and took up residence at the Sea Coral Inn on the

other side of town, where he stayed another three days, continuing his studies of the Almanac. At last his calculations prompted him to be off about his affairs. He purchased a small cart drawn by a dainty little pony, which carried him along the road at a spanking pace, with a twinkling clack-clack-clack of varnished hooves. Past the Three Lampreys rode Visbhume, sitting proudly high on the seat, then along the road to Rundle River Valley, up the River Road to Green Man's Gap, over and down upon the Ceald.

## VII

A STRANGE SWEET MOOD had come over Glyneth of late. When in the company of her friends, or even with Dhrun, she often would have preferred solitude. And sometimes, when she had slipped away and was truly alone, then: perversity of perversities! an indefinable uneasiness afflicted her, as if somewhere wonderful events were in progress, and there she longed to be, though, poor forlorn girl, she had not been invited and no one even noticed her absence.

Glyneth became wistful and restless. At times fascinating images came to tease her, glimpses less substantial than daydreams, figments and fancies, of

madcap revelries by moonlight; of fetes where she was adored by gallant strangers; of drifting over land and sea in a magic ship of the air, in the company of the one she loved most of all and who loved her no less.

With Dhrun gone from Domreis and then-schooling at recess, Glyneith dithered and wavered for a day or so, but without the presence of Dhrun or Aillas, Miraldra held no charm, and she took herself to Watershade, where she resolved that she would read all the books in Ospero's library. She made a brave start, and read Lagronius: his Chronicles, and Memories of Nausicaa and even started to pick her way through

The Iliad, but the dreamy moods came on her often, and the books were put aside.

When the lake lay calm and blue in the sunlight, she liked to row out into total solitude and lie back to watch the tall white clouds. There was no sweeter occupation; she seemed to become one with this world she loved so dearly, which was hers to enjoy and possess during her term. And sometimes the feelings became too intense and she rose up quickly, to sit with arms clasped around her knees, blinking back tears for the passing of halcyon moments.

So Glyneth indulged herself with

romantic excesses, and at times wondered if someone had cast a glamour upon her. Dame Flora became vaguely worried because her darling Glyneth had not gone out to climb trees or jump fences.

As the days passed, Glyneth began to feel lonely. Occasionally she rode into the village to visit her friend the Lady Alicia at Black Oak Manor; as often she walked into the Wild Woods to pick strawberries.

The day before Dhrun was due to arrive, Glyneth arose early and after due consideration, decided to gather strawberries. She kissed Dame Flora



goodbye and taking her basket, set off into the Wild Woods.

By noon Glyneth had not returned to Watershade, nor yet by sunset, and servants went out to search. They found nothing.

Early the next morning a messenger was despatched to Domreis; he met Dhrun along the way and both rode in haste to Castle Miraldra.

# Chapter 10

## I

FOR AILLAS, the Ska occupation of Suarach posed him more than a military dilemma; the action, so coldly deliberate, also inflicted a notable personal humiliation upon him. In the purview of the Ulfs, such a provocation compelled retort, since a person who suffered shame by the purposeful act of another carried the stink of the occasion upon him until his enemy had been punished or until he had died in the attempt. Hence, as Aillas went about his affairs, he felt conspicuous and tainted,

and knew that every eye watched him.

Aillas ignored the covert attention as best he could and pressed the training of his brigades with even greater diligence. Of late he had noticed a gratifying new spirit among the troops: a briskness and precision where before the Ulfish slouch and reluctance to move to unfamiliar cadences had been more apparent. The changes would seem to reflect a grudging confidence in the army's fighting efficiency. Aillas still wondered as to their stamina and cohesiveness in the face of ponderous and ominously careful onslaughts of the Ska, which in the past had destroyed not only North Ulfish armies, but also Godelian and

Daut forces of superior number.

It was a cruel problem, with no comfortable solutions. If Aillas risked a confrontation and events went badly, his troops' morale would be shattered and he would lose his credibility as a commander. The Ska, by occupying Suarach, apparently hoped to provoke him into a reckless set battle, where their heavy cavalry could demolish the Ulfish army as a hammer smashes a nut. Aillas had no intention of risking such an engagement, certainly not at this time. Still, if he waited too long before taking any action whatever, the Ulfs, who were temperamentally prompted to quick and savage response to provocation, might

well become cynical and stale.

Sir Pirmence, returning from the high fells with a levy of conscripts, reinforced Aillas' own fears. "You will never train them finer than they are now," said Pirmence. "They need to test themselves and make sure that your heathen ideas are practical."

"Very well," said Aillas. "We shall put them to the test. But on ground of my own choosing."

Pirmence hesitated and seemed to conduct an internal dialogue. At last he took a swaggering step forward and said: "I can also impart to you this

report, which is well-founded: Castle Sank is a fortress across the border to the north.”

“As a matter of fact, I know it well,” said Aillas.

“The lord is the Duke Luhalcx. At this moment he has taken his family and much of his retinue to Skaghane, so that Sank is only lightly defended.”

“That is interesting news,” said Aillas. Two hours later he issued marching orders to six companies of Ulfish light cavalry and archers, two companies of Troice heavy cavalry, two companies of Troice infantry and a platoon of thirty-

five Troice knights. They would depart Doun Darric at tomorrow's sunset, that they might evade Ska surveillance.

Aillas was well aware that Ska spies monitored his movements. In order to neutralize their activity he had organized a squad of secret counterespionage police. Even before the issuance of marching orders Aillas sent his secret police out to strategic places around the camp, where they would be sure to intercept couriers attempting to carry information from Doun Darric.

The sun dropped into the west and twilight settled upon the camp. Aillas sat at his work-table studying maps. Outside

he heard a scuffle of steps and muttered voices; the door opened and Sir Flews, his aide, looked into the room. “Sir, the police have made a capture.”

Sir Flews spoke with awe and suppressed excitement. Aillas straightened up from the table. “Bring them in.”

Six men entered the room, two with arms tied behind their backs. Aillas looked in slack-jawed wonder to see, first, a slim black-eyed young man with black hair cut in the Ska style, and, second, Sir Pirmence.

The captain of the police was Hilgretz,



younger brother to Sir Ganwy of Koll Keep, and now he made his report. “We took up our posts, and almost immediately after dark noticed a flashing light from the camp. We deployed with care and captured the Ska at the crest of the hill, and when we followed the light to its source we came upon Sir Pirmence.”

“This is a sad situation,” said Aillas.

Sir Pirmence gave his full agreement. “It is cheerless indeed.”

“You betrayed me at Domreis, and I brought you here that you might redeem yourself; instead you have betrayed me

again.”

Sir Pirmence looked at Aillas askance, like an old silver-haired fox. “You knew of my work in Domreis? How is this possible when it was so discreet?”

“Nothing is discreet when Yane starts looking into it. Both you and Maloof are traitors. Rather than kill you I thought to make use of your talents.”

“Ah Aillas, it was a gracious thought but over-subtle; I failed to grasp your intention. So poor Maloof has also transgressed.”

“He did and now he pays his debt. You

also worked well and might have earned back your life, as I hope will Maloof.”

“Maloof dances to a different tune than I. More just to say, he hears no tune whatever and could not lift a leg if Terpsichore herself came to lead the measure.”

“At least he has desisted from his treachery, or so I suppose. Why have you not done likewise?”

Sir Pirmence sighed and shook his head. “Who knows? I hate you, and yet truly I love you. I sneer at your callow simplicity, but I glory in your enterprise. I crave your success, but I strive for your

despair. What is wrong with me? Where is my flaw? Perhaps I wish that I were you, and since this cannot be I must punish you for the fault. Or if you prefer the crude facts, they are these: I was born to duplicity.”

“And what of Castle Sank? Was your information no more than bait to lure me and many good men to their deaths?”

“No, on my honour! Do you smile? Smile then. I am far too proud to lie. I gave you only the purest truth.”

Aillas looked to the Ska. “And you, sir: do you have anything to say?”

“Nothing.”

“You are a young man, with a long life ahead of you. If I spare this life, will you give me your parole never to work again to my detriment, or that of South Ulfland?”

“I could not in good faith make this guaranty.”

Aillas took Hilgretz aside. “I must put this matter into your hands. We cannot excite the camp by dangling Sir Pirmence and the Ska from a gibbet just before we march; there would be too many questions and too much conjecture.”

“Leave it to me, sir. I will take them into the woods, where all will go quietly.”

Aillas turned back to his maps. “Let that be the way of it.”

## II

AFTERGLOW STILL COLOURED THE WEST; in the east a soft yellow moon rose above the Teach tac Teach. Aillas climbed upon the bed of a wagon and addressed his troops: “Now we go forth to fight. We are not waiting for the Ska to attack us; we are marching to attack the Ska. They are to know a new experience, and perhaps we can avenge

a few of those crimes which they have worked upon this land.

“Now you know the reason for your long and hard training: that you may match the Ska in military skills. We are their equal except in one respect. They are veterans. They make few mistakes. I tell you now once more: we must carry out our battle-plans, no more and no less! Never be tempted by feints or by a seeming sudden advantage. Perhaps it is real, whereupon we will exploit the situation, but cautiously. More likely, it is false and you will lose your lives.

“We have a true advantage. The Ska are few in number. They cannot afford large

losses, and this is our strategy: to maximize their losses and to minimize our own. That means: strike and break away! Attack! Retreat! Attack again! With the strictest attention to orders! Let us have no heroics, no proud gallantries: only competence and toughness.

“There is no more to be said. Good luck to us all.”

Four of the Ulfish companies and the two companies of Troice heavy cavalry, under the command of Sir Redyard, departed into the northeast, where they would guard the road between Suarach and Castle Sank. The other companies set off to the north toward Castle Sank



itself, across a landscape of which Aillas already had bitter experience.<sup>19</sup>

Sank served as an administrative node for the district and as a waypoint for labor-gangs and slaves on the way to the great western fortress Poelitetz. The household at Sank, during Aillas' stint as a domestic slave, consisted of Duke Luhalcx, his spouse Chraio, their son Alvicx, their daughter Tatzel, with numerous retainers. Aillas, dejected and lonely, had become to some extent infatuated with Tatzel, who, by the very nature of things, barely noticed his existence, if at all.

Tatzel at the time had been fifteen years

old: a slim girl of verve and flair who carried herself in a jaunty carefree manner unique to herself: a style purposeful, extravagant and exuberant, if somewhat too abrupt and personal to qualify as pure grace. Aillas saw her as a creature luminous with imagination and intelligence, and he found every detail of her conduct entrancing. She walked with steps somewhat longer than necessary, with a kind of reckless swagger and an expression of pensive concentration and purpose, as if she were bound on a mission of the utmost importance. In typical Ska style her black hair was cut ear-length but retained enough curl to flow loosely. While slender and energetic, her

contours were adequately rounded and feminine, and often, as Aillas watched her saunter past, he ached to reach out and seize her. Had he performed so rash an act and had she reported it to her father, he might well have been gelded, and he carefully kept his inclinations in check. Tatzel would now be in Skaghane with her family: a fact which caused Aillas more than a twinge of disappointment, since to meet Tatzel again under changed circumstances had been for a long period the stuff of his daydreams.

As the moon rose into the sky the columns departed Doun Darric. Aillas planned to march by night, with

moonlight to show the way and scouts to warn of bogs and quagmires. During daylight hours, the troops would take concealment in a copse or a fold of the moors. If not intercepted or distracted by unforeseen circumstances, Aillas estimated that four nights of marching should bring the expedition close to Castle Sank. The land had been ravaged; they would meet no one along the way excepting a few crofters and small herdsmen, who cared nothing for the passage of troops by night, and Aillas had reason to hope that his band might arrive at Castle Sank unheralded.

Toward morning of the third day scouts led the troops out upon the main road

leading down from the old tin mines: a road sometimes used by the Ska on forays into South Ulfland: a road which Aillas had once walked with a rope around his neck.

The troops took shelter and rested during the day, and at sunset continued their march. Still they had encountered no Ska parties, either small or large.

Shortly before dawn an odd droning rasping sound was heard in the distance, which Aillas recognized and identified: the voice of the sawmill, where heavy steel blades ten feet in length were driven up and down in reciprocating motion by the power of a waterwheel, to

cut planks from pine and cedar logs carted down from the high Teach tac Teach by timber-cutters.

Castle Sank was close at hand. Aillas would have preferred to rest his troops after the night's march, but now there was no effective cover. By proceeding they would arrive at Sank during that languid hour before sunrise, when blood ran slow and responses were sluggish.

Not so in the South Ulfish troops; with pulses pounding they came at speed down the road, hooves slurring in the dust, harness jingling and metal clanking, dark shapes hunching across the pre-dawn sky.

Ahead loomed Castle Sank with a single great tower rising from the central citadel. "Straight on!" Aillas cried out. "Drive inside before they drop the outer gate!"

Fifty horsemen charged in a sudden pounding lunge, with the foot soldiers running behind. In their arrogance the Ska had neglected to swing shut the timber and iron doors in the outer walls; the Ulfish troops burst into the courtyard unchallenged. Before them the portal into the citadel and the inner castle

also stood wide, but the sentries, recovering from their initial immobility, reacted and the portcullis slammed

down in the face of the charging knights.

From their barracks came a dozen Ska warriors, only half-dressed and half-armed; they were cut down and the battle, such as it was, came to an end.

On the walls of the citadel archers appeared, but the Ulfish archers, mounting the outer wall, killed several, and wounded several more, and the others took to cover. From the citadel a man jumped out on the roof, ran crouching to the stables, where he seized upon a horse and pounded away across the fells. Aillas ordered pursuit. "Chase him a mile or two, then let him get away. Tristano! Where is Tristano?"



“Here, sir.” Tristano was the second in command.

“Take a strong force to the sawmill. Kill the Ska and whoever resists you. Burn the warehouses and break the wheel, but leave the mill intact; someday we will find it useful. Work swiftly and bring back the labor-gangs. Flews! Send out scouts in all directions, that we may not be surprised in our turn.”

The outbuildings, shops and sheds surrounding Castle Sank gave birth to soaring flames. The castle horses were led from the stables, which were also burned. The man-hunting dogs were destroyed, and the kennels put to the

torch. From the dormitory at the back of the kitchen garden came the household servants, and the dormitory was fired.

The household slaves were brought before Aillas. He looked from face to face. There: the tall bald man with the vulpine yellow-skinned face and drooping eyelids: that was Imboden, the major domo. And there: the slender handsome man with the mercurial flow of expression and the prematurely silver hair: he was Cyprian, the slave superintendent. Aillas knew them both for sycophants who used the men under them for their own advantage.

Aillas motioned them to step forward.

“Imboden, Cyprian! It is a pleasure to see you! Do you remember me?”

Imboden spoke no word, aware that words were useless no matter what the identity of the man who addressed him; he looked up toward the sky as if he were bored. Cyprian was more sanguine. He studied Aillas and cried out in glad surprise: “I remember you well! Though now your name escapes me. Are you bent on suicide, to have returned like this?”

“That I am here is the stuff of desperate longing and hope fulfilled!” declared Aillas. “Do you remember Cargus, who was cook? And Yane, who worked in

the laundry? How they would rejoice to be here today, rather than in Troicinet, where both command the rank of 'earl.'  
“

Cyprian, smiling easily, said: “I can imagine your satisfaction! It is shared, to greater or less degree, by all of us! Hurrah! We are now free men!”

“For you and Imboden freedom will be short and bitter.”

“Come, sir!” cried Cyprian in anguish, his great gray eyes moist. “Were we not all comrades in the old days?”

“I remember very little comradeship,”

said Aillas. “I remember the constant fear of betrayal. How many men you have sent to their doom no one will ever know. A single one would be enough. Flews, throw up a gibbet and hang those two high, in full view of the citadel.”

Imboden went wordlessly to his death, and managed by his conduct to convey a sense of bored contempt for everyone associated with the circumstances.

Cyprian, however, burst into tears, and cried out his complaints: “This is sheer infamy! That I, who have done so many good things, should know such cruelty! Have you no mercy? When I think of my many kindnesses-”

From those who had been his staff came jeers, ironic laughs, and calls: “Hang him high!” “He is even more sly than Imboden, who at least made no pretenses.” “For this reptile hanging is too good!”

“Up with him,” said Aillas.

Down from the sawmill came Sir Tristano with his troops, followed by a bewildered cluster of sawmill slaves. Among these Aillas discovered another old acquaintance: Taussig, who had been his first foreman. Taussig, who was crippled, cantankerous and knew a single goal in life: the fulfillment of his work quotas, recognized Aillas

immediately and without pleasure. “I see you have taken your vengeance upon Imboden and Cyprian; am I to be next?”

Aillas gave a sour laugh. “If I hanged everyone who has served me ill, I would leave behind an avenue of corpses wherever I went. I will do you no favors, nor will I do you a harm.”

“The harm you already have done me! Seventeen years I have toiled for the Ska; I needed but three years more, and then I might enjoy my reward: five acres of good land, a cottage and a spouse. You have taken this from me.”

Aillas said: “From your point of view

the world is a sorry place, and you may well be right.”

Aillas turned his attention back to the household servants. He learned what he already knew: that the Duke Luhalcx with the Lady Chraio and the Lady Tatzel were absent on a visit to Skaghane. Rumor had it that the Duke Luhalcx was to be sent afar on a special mission of great importance, while the Ladies Chraio and Tatzel were expected home at any time. Sir Alvicx was at the moment lord of the castle, and commanded a garrison of about forty warriors, including several knights of notable achievement.



Aillas knew well the fortifications of the Castle Sank citadel: the walls were high and the stone was sound. Traveling light, he had brought no siege engines, nor was there time for a protracted investment of the fortress; he hunted larger game.

Aillas spoke to the erstwhile slaves, of castle and sawmill. "You are once again your own men, as free as the air, and the way lies open to the south. Go to Doun Darric on the Malheu River; there present yourselves to Sir Maloof, who will find you employment. Should you feel inclined to kill Ska, you may join the army of the king. Take food from the commissary yonder and load it on the horses; arm yourselves as best you can

and take to Sir Maloof these horses captured from the Duke's stables. You, Narles, whom I remember as a decent fellow, I place in command. For utmost security, travel by night and sleep by day in the coverts. You should find no trouble; the region is free of Ska."

"There are Ska up at the tin mines," spoke one.

"In that case, do not go near the tin mines, unless you elect to fall on the Ska from ambush and strike a sound blow for your new king."

Narles said in a subdued voice: "I fear that is beyond our powers at the moment;

we require every iota of our courage simply to run away.”

“You must do as you see fit,” said Aillas. “In any case, leave at once, and may good luck go with you.”

Diffidently, the former slaves took their departure.

A day passed, and another, during which Aillas did as much damage as possible to Castle Sank and its precincts. Three times his scouts rode back announcing the approach of Ska riders, all from the direction of Poelitz. The first two parties were small groups of a dozen riders each; they rode blindly into

ambush, and suddenly found themselves surrounded by archers with drawn bows. In both cases they ignored the command: "Surrender or die!" Spurring their mounts and bending low in the saddle they tried to break free from the trap, and were instantly killed, thus relieving Aillas of the awkward problem of dealing with prisoners.

The third party was a different matter, and consisted of about eighty heavy cavalry coming down from Poelitz, evidently for reassignment elsewhere.

Again Aillas set up his ambush of archers and mounted knights in a copse beside the road. Presently the Ska

contingent, riding four abreast, came into view: seasoned troops, confident but far from reckless. They wore their conical black-enameled steel helmets and shirts of chain mail, as well as greaves. They carried short lances, swords, chain-balls- the so-called “morning-stars”- with bow and arrows in quivers at their saddlebows. As they came placidly along the road, thirty-five Troice knights charged from the copse and galloping downhill with lances leveled, struck into the rear third of the column. To cries of horror and shock the lances drove through chain mail and lifted the riders from their horses, to drop them into the dust beside the road.

Riding up the hill and reforming, they charged once more. From the copse poured arrows, each aimed with careful intent. The commander bawled orders to depart this place of death, and the column started off at full gallop. On the hillside four ropes were cut, allowing a great oak tree to topple across the road, and the Ska troops for a period lost their organization.

Finally, battling desperately, hand to hand, the Ska managed to collect in a small group. Three times Aillas called for surrender, before pounding them again with his knights; three times the Ska absorbed the blows and reformed as best they could, and with stern faces

hurled themselves upon their enemies.

There was to be no surrender; all would die on the sun-dappled road.

### III

IN A SOMBER MOOD Aillas led his troops back to Castle Sank. A victory such as this, which had been, in fact, sheer slaughter of valiant men, brought no exultation. The deed was necessary, no doubt as to this, since it was how the war must be won. Still, Aillas could feel no pride in the event, and was gratified to discover his troops were of similar mind.

All taken with all, he had reason for satisfaction. His casualties had been light; his units had conducted themselves with flawless precision; for the Ska the loss of so many veteran troops was a major disaster.

“If ambush I must, then ambush I will,” Aillas muttered to himself. “A fig for chivalry, at least until the war is won.”

From Castle Sank Aillas sent back wagons to salvage weapons; Ska steel, forged with infinite patience, equalled the best in all the world, including the fabulous steels of far Cipangu, and the lesser blades of Damascus.



The time had come to move west, to deal with those troops coming up from Suarach which might have evaded the attentions of Sir Redyard.

At dawn the investing force made ready to depart. The events of the next few days were unpredictable and all carried rations of hardtack, cheese and dried fruit in their saddlebags.

Minutes before departure one of the scouts rode pell-mell into camp, bringing news of a Ska company approaching from the northwest, along that road which led to the Ska Foreshore and Skaghane. This company consisted of several persons of quality and their

escort, including one who might well be Lady Chraio, spouse of Duke Luhalcx. along with another lady of middle years, and a youth. The escort consisted of a dozen lightly-armed horsemen; clearly no news of the events at Sank had yet been made known across North Ulfland.

Aillas listened with keen interest. He asked: “What of the Lady Tatzel? Was she not among the group?”

“As to that, sir, I cannot say surely, since I am not acquainted with the lady, and I necessarily spied upon the column from a distance. If she is in her middle years, she might be one of the two ladies I have mentioned.”

“She is young, and almost like a boy in the shape of her body.”

“A youth rides with the group. I took him for a lad; he could be the Lady Tatzel riding in a boy’s garments. This is not unusual among the Ska.”

Aillas called Sir Balor, one of his Ulfish captains, and gave instructions. “Select your ground so that you can surround the group, and kill only when you must. Under no circumstances harm the ladies or the youth. Send off your captives to Doun Darric with an appropriate guard, then rejoin us at your best speed.”

Sir Balor rode off with fifty men to the

northwest. At the same time the balance of the army set out toward Suarach, leaving only a detachment at Sank to hold the siege and destroy any further small groups coming down from the mountains.

Aillas had been restless ever since he had learned of the approaching company. He made an impulsive decision, and placing Sir Tristano in command of the army, rode off after Sir Balor, already half a mile to the north.

The day was warm and bright; the moors were at their finest, fragrant with the sweetness of heather, the tang of furze and the smoky reek of the dank soil

itself. The clear air seemed to enhance the detail of far objects, and as Aillas rode over a rise, he commanded a view of panoramic scope: to right and left the rise and fall of the gray-green moors, marked by outcrops of rock and occasional copses of larch, alder or cypress. Ahead, the landscape fell away to the horizon, with far dark marks to indicate forests. About a mile to the west Aillas saw the company of Ska bound carelessly for Castle Sank.

Sir Balor and his company, riding in a swale, were not yet visible; the Ska idled along placidly, oblivious to their imminent peril.

The two cavalcades converged. The Ska, breasting a little rise, paused at the ridge: perhaps to rest their mounts, perhaps to admire the view, or possibly because some subliminal signal had aroused their uneasiness: a wisp of dust, a far jingle of metal, a muted drumming of hooves. For a moment they surveyed the landscape. Aillas was still too far to discern detail, but the thought that one among that far clot of forms might be the Lady Tatzel caused him a thrill of excitement mingled with a darker sardonic pleasure.

The Ska rode forward, and now to Aillas' dismay, the troops of Sir Balor, rather than keeping to cover and waiting

to encircle the Ska, rode pell-mell up over a swale only a few hundred yards to the south of the Ska. Aillas cursed under his breath; Sir Balor should have sent a single man to reconnoiter, and now all chance of surprise was lost.

The Ska paused only a moment to take stock of the situation, then veered to the northeast on a course which, so they hoped, would bring them closer to Castle Sank: perhaps more close than their assailants might wish to approach. Sir Balor altered his course to intercept them, and again Aillas cursed Sir Balor and his hot-headed tactics. If he were to allow them to approach Castle Sank, they would have been met by those

troops left to hold the siege. Then, if Lord Alvicz had attempted a desperate sortie to rescue his mother and sister, Castle Sank itself might have been taken.

But Sir Balor, like a hound on a hot scent, could think only of closing with his quarry, and took his troops pounding across the moors in hot pursuit. The Ska bore away to the north, toward a small forest and, beyond, a rocky knoll surmounted by the ruins of an ancient fort. Sir Balor and his forces came on apace, the faster horses gaining ground perceptibly on the Ska, with the slower strung out behind. Farther still to the rear came Aillas, and presently he could discern the individual Ska riders. He



took note of the so-called ‘youth’; it was clearly Tatzel, and she wore a suit of dark green cloth, low boots and a loose black cap.

The Ska were obviously making for the old fortress, where they could most readily withstand the superior numbers of the attackers. They rode into the forest and a few moments later emerged; Sir Balor and his men followed.

The Ska began to climb the knoll; Aillas sought through the group: where was Tatzel? Where the youth in dark green with the black cap?

She was nowhere to be seen.

Aillas laughed. He pulled up his horse, and watched as Sir Balor and his troop rode pell-mell through the forest and out, now with only a hundred yards between the two parties.

Aillas kept his eyes on the forest. As soon as the Ulfish troops had passed, a lone rider emerged and rode away at full speed toward Castle Sank, from which she no doubt intended to bring succor to those at bay in the old fortress.

Her course would take her somewhat to the north of Aillas. He examined the terrain, then swung around his horse and rode to where he might hope to intercept her most easily.

Tatzel drew near, crouched low over the horse's surging neck, with locks of black hair blowing back on the wind. She turned her head and her face became shocked to discover Aillas riding hard down upon her, and she could not restrain a cry of consternation. Snatching at the reins, she turned her horse to the north, away from Castle Sank, in a direction Aillas was not at all anxious to explore. Rashly or wisely, Aillas hesitated not an instant; never before had he flushed quarry so precious into the open, and for better or worse he could not abandon it now, no matter where it took him; and so began a wild chase across the North Ulfish moors.

Tatzel rode a young black mare, sleek, long of leg but with no great depth of chest and perhaps less stamina. Aillas' roan was larger and heavier, and bred for durability; Aillas doubted not that sooner or later he could overtake Tatzel, especially in hard going, and as he pursued, he sought to drive her toward the mountains, ever higher: away from both Castle Sank and the lower moors where she might discover help in the form of a Ska settlement or another party of travellers.

Tatzel seemed intent only upon using the speed of her mare to its best advantage, but the moors afforded uncertain and sometimes dangerous footing, and

neither horse could gain on the other. Aillas carried no bow, and so could not put an arrow into the mare's withers to bring it to a halt.

A mile went by, and another; and the horses flagged. With the advantage in endurance, Aillas began to gain, yard by yard, and soon Tatzel must be taken. In a desperation she had never in her lifetime known before, she swung sharply up into a rocky gulch which, between a pair of spurs, led up to the higher moors, hoping, perhaps, to dodge into a convenient covert and lose Aillas as he blundered past.

To no avail. No such covert offered

itself, and in any case Aillas came only twenty yards behind, and was not likely to be so deceived. The gulch became choked with sedge and alder thicket; Tatzel turned up the side of the canyon, and, dismounting, pulled her horse up over ledges of rotten black rock and through small furze bushes, and at last clambered up to the stony top-surface of the spur. Aillas followed, but halted when Tatzel began to roll stones down upon him, and so was obliged to climb to the top by a different route, which allowed Tatzel a few yards vantage.

Aillas reached the face of the spur. Gullies dropped away to either side. Behind him it seemed that he could see

forever under the windy Atlantic sky: across heather-gray moors, dark declivities, the black smears of far forests. Tatzel staggered up toward the high ridge, pulling her distressed mare behind her. Aillas followed and once more began to close the distance between.

Tatzel mounting her horse, rode at best speed, up to the plateau, with the final thrust of the great Teach tac Teach now looming close at hand, and, most notably, Noc, the first of the Cloudcutters.

Aillas followed, but found to his great discouragement that his horse had

somehow wrenched its leg and had gone lame. Aillas cursed, pulled the bridle from the horse's head, threw off the saddle and let it go free. This was serious misfortune, and suddenly his folly in setting off in pursuit of Tatzel, leaving no word nor message, was brought home to him.

Still, all was not lost, by any means. He shouldered his wallet and set out after Tatzel afoot. So winded was her mare and so difficult the footing among the loose stones that once more he found himself rapidly gaining upon her. Another two minutes should bring her to bay.



Tatzel recognized as much. She cast a despairing glance around the landscape, but no help offered itself; Aillas, observing her face as she looked back at him, could not help but feel a qualm of pity.

He hardened his heart. "Tatzel, dear little Tatzel with your haughty head so high! You have known much of despair and fear and sorrow in others; why should you not feel some of your own?"

Tatzel came to a decision. If she rode onward Aillas would have her at once. On her left hand opened a valley with steep stony walls. Tatzel paused an instant, took a deep breath, then, jumping

from her horse, pulled it over the edge of the slope. Sliding, squatting on its haunches, eyes glaring white, nickering in terror, the mare floundered down the slope. Her footing gave way; she fell and began to roll with a grotesque thrashing of legs and torso and contorted neck. The slope increased in pitch; far down the horse struck full into a boulder and lay still.

Tatzel, sliding and clawing, holding for dear life to shrubs and bushes, encountered a patch of loose scree. It slid treacherously from under her feet, to create a landslide which carried her to the bottom, and there she lay dazed. After a minute she tried to move but her

left leg could not support her and she sank back in pain, staring at the broken limb.

Aillas watched the disastrous descent, then, with haste no longer of overriding concern, chose a more careful route to the bottom.

He found Tatzel slumped against a rock, face white with pain. He looked to her horse, which had broken its back and lay wheezing and blowing bloody foam. Aillas stabbed it quickly with his sword and the horse became still.

Aillas returned to Tatzel and dropped to his knee beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“My leg is broken.”

Aillas carried her to a bed of river sand, and as gently as possible tried to straighten the leg. It seemed cleanly broken, without splintering of the bone, so he thought, and needed principally the support of splints.

Aillas rose to his feet and surveyed the valley. In olden times the river meadows had supported a series of farmsteads, which had disappeared leaving only the crumble of stone fences and a few decaying ruins. He saw no living creature and neither saw nor smelled smoke. Still, beside the river ran the vestige of a trail; the valley could not be

altogether unknown to traffic, which might prove to his disadvantage.

Aillas went to the river's edge and cut two dozen willow withes. Returning to Tatzel he peeled off bark and gave it to her. "Chew it; it will help relieve the pain."

From the dead horse he brought Tatzel's cloak, the saddle blanket, and her small wallet of black leather clasped with gold, together with straps and buckles from the bridle and saddle.

Aillas gave her more willow bark to chew, then with his knife slit the leg of her trousers up past her slender knee. He

folded aside the cloth to bare the leg.

“I am no bone-setter,” said Aillas. “I can only do for you what I have seen done for others. I will try not to cause you pain.”

Tatzel had nothing to say, since, in the first place, she found the circumstances confusing. Aillas’ demeanor seemed neither ferocious nor even ominous; if he were intent upon a sexual attack would he pause to tie her leg in a splint, which could but interfere with his activity?

Aillas cut a strip from her cloak, and wrapped it around her leg that it might serve as a cushion, then arranged the

withes, cut to proper length. Finally, he pulled the leg straight. Tatzel gasped, but made no other outcry, and Aillas strapped the splints into place. Tatzel sighed and closed her eyes. Aillas made a cushion of his cloak and put it under her head. He brushed the damp curls from her forehead and studied the clear, wan features with mixed feelings, recalling other times at Castle Sank. Then he had longed to touch her, to make her aware of his presence. Now that he might fondle her as he chose, his inclination was restrained by a whole new set of strictures.

Tatzel opened her eyes, and studied his face. "I have seen you before. ... I

cannot remember where.”

Aillas thought: Already she had forgotten her fear; perhaps he was too transparent. Indeed, she seemed to be demonstrating that ineffable Ska certainty of place, which, had it been less innocent, might be considered arrogant. In such case, the game became more interesting.

Tatzel said: “Your voice is not Ulfish. Who are you, then?”

“I am a gentleman of Troicinet.”

Tatzel grimaced, either from pain or from unpleasant recollection. “One time



at Sank we had a servant from Troicinet. He escaped.”

“I escaped from Sank.”

Tatzel looked at him with dispassionate curiosity. “At the time everyone spoke harshly of you, because you poisoned us. Your name is ‘Halis’ or ‘Ailish’: something of the sort.”

“Ordinarily I call myself ‘Aillas.’ “

Tatzel seemed to make no connection between Aillas the house-servant and Aillas, King of Dascinet, Troicinet and South Ulfland, even had she known the latter’s name.

Tatzel spoke without accent. “You are foolish to haunt these parts. When you are captured, you may well be gelded.”

“I hope, in that case, I shall not be captured.”

“Were you in company with the bandits who attacked us?”

“They were not bandits; they were soldiers in the service of the King of South Ulfland.”

“It is all the same.” Tatzel closed her eyes and lay quiet. After a moment of thought, Aillas rose to his feet and considered the surroundings. Shelter for

the night was important, but even more so, security and concealment. The trail along the riverbank gave evidence of at least some small traffic, and would seem to connect the High Windy Way with settlements and Ska depots along the lower moors.

Some small distance up the valley Aillas noticed a dilapidated hut which might even now afford refuge to herders and wanderers of the hills. The sun was falling behind the mountains; soon the valley would be in shadow. He looked down. "Tatzel."

She opened her eyes.

“There is a hut yonder, where we can shelter for the night. I will help you to stand. Put your arms around my neck... . Up you come.”

Aillas found that his heart was beating much faster than was normal. The warm pressure of Tatzel's body against his own, her arms clasping him, her clean fragrance commingled of pine-needles and lemon verbena and crushed geranium: they were intensely stimulating. Aillas did not want to release her. “Put your arm around me and I will support you... . Take a step.”

# Chapter 11

## I

FOR AN INSTANT, after Aillas had raised Tatzel to her feet, they stood immobile, her arms around his neck, face only inches from his own, and across Aillas' mind flashed recollections of dreary days at Castle Sank. He heaved a deep sigh and turned away.

Step by step, the two moved along the trail, Tatzel hopping and Aillas supporting her weight. At last they reached the hut which was all that

survived of an old farmstead. The site was pleasant, on a rise beside a small stream coursing down from a wooded ravine at the back. Rude stone walls supported cedar poles for rafters and tiles of mica schist for the roof. A door of old gray wood sagged in the doorway; within, on one side was a table and a bench; on the other a hearth and a makeshift chimney to carry away the smoke.

Aillas lowered Tatzel to the bench and eased her leg. He looked into her face; “Do you feel pain?”

Tatzel replied only with a single short nod and a quick glance of wonder for so

foolish a question.

“Rest as well as you can; I will be back in a moment.”

Aillas gathered fresh willow shoots with thick bark from the riverbank. He noticed crayfish in the shallow pools and a noble trout lazing in the shadows. He took the willow back to Tatzel and peeled away the bark. “Chew this. I will bring you water.”

At the side of the hut the stream had been deepened and dammed to form a small pool, in which Aillas discovered a wooden bucket, submerged that it should not dry out and crack. Aillas gratefully

brought up the bucket and carried water into the hut. He gathered grass, sedge and shrubbery, and piled it on the floor to make a bed. By the river's edge he found drifts of dry wood, which he carried into the hut. Then, striking a spark, he blew up a fire.

Tatzel, sitting at the table, seemed absorbed in her own thoughts and watched him without interest.

Dusk had come to the valley. Aillas once more left the hut. On this occasion he was gone almost half an hour. He returned with several pieces of fresh red meat wrapped in reeds and also a branch loaded with elderberries, which he



placed beside Tatzel. Kneeling at the hearth he laid the meat on a flat stone and cut off thin strips which he threaded upon twigs and set to toast over the fire.

When the meat was cooked to his satisfaction he brought it to the table. Tatzel had been eating elderberries; now she ate the meat, slowly and without great appetite. She drank from the pail, then, pouring water on a kerchief from her wallet, she cleaned and rinsed her fingers.

Aillas chose his words carefully: "It might be difficult for you to relieve yourself comfortably. Whenever you wish I will help you as best I can."

“I need none of your help,” said Tatzel shortly.

“As you like. When you are ready to sleep I will make up your bed.”

Tatzel gave her head a fretful toss, to indicate that she would much prefer to sleep elsewhere, such as her own bed at Castle Sank, then sat staring stonily into the flames. Presently she turned to inspect Aillas, as if now, for the first time, she were ready to recognize his presence in the hut. “You stated that soldiers and not bandits attacked my party?”

“So I did, and such is the case.”

“What will they do with my mother?”

“They are under orders to spare life whenever possible. I expect that your mother will be captured and sent into South Ulfland as a slave.”

“A slave? My mother?” Tatzel wrestled with the idea, then put it aside, as something too grotesque to be considered. She looked sidelong at Aillas, thinking: What an odd person! At times as grim and careful as an old man, and the next moment he appears little more than a boy. Amazing what turns up among one's slaves! The episode is most puzzling! Why did he pursue me so remorselessly? Does he hope to collect

ransom? She asked: “What of you? Are you a soldier? Or a bandit?”

Aillas reflected a moment, then said: “I am more nearly a soldier than a bandit. But I am neither.”

“What are you then?”

“As I told you before, I am a gentleman of Troicinet.”

“I know nothing of Troicinet. Why did you wander so far from safety? Even in South Ulfland you were secure.”

“I came partly to punish the Ska for their looting and slave-taking, and also, if the

truth be known ...” Aillas stopped short. Looking into the flames, he decided to say no more.

Tatzel prompted him. ” ‘And if the truth be known’?”

Aillas shrugged. “At Castle Sank I was forced into servitude. Often I watched you as you went here and there, and I came to admire you. I promised myself that someday I would return and we would meet on somewhat different terms. That is one of the reasons I am here.”

Tatzel mused a moment. “You are most pertinacious. Very few slaves have

escaped Castle Sank.”

“I was recaptured and sent to Poelitz,” said Aillas. “I escaped from there as well.”

“All this is confused and complex,” said Tatzel crossly. “It is beyond both my comprehension and my interest. All I know is that you have caused me pain and inconvenience. Your slavish yearnings seem disgusting and truly insolent, and you show a gracelessness in bruising them about.”

Aillas laughed again. “Quite right! My hopes and daydreams now seem nothing less than callow when I put them into

words. Still, I have only answered your question, and with candor. In the process I have clarified my own thinking. Or, better to say, I have been forced to admit certain things to myself.”

Tatzel sighed. “Again you speak in riddles. I care nothing for their solving.”

“It is simple enough. When the daydreams and romances of two persons run alike, they become friends, or, as it may be, lovers. When this is not the case, they find no pleasure in each other’s company. It is an easy concept, though but few take the trouble to understand it.”

Tatzel looked into the fire. “Personally, I care not a fig for your mournings and vagaries. Explain them to persons whom you think they may fascinate.”

“For the present I will keep them to myself,” said Aillas.

After a few moments Tatzel stated: “I am surprised that your band dared venture so far from South Ulfland.”

“The explanation again is simple. Since we came to attack Castle Sank, it was necessary to come at least so far.”

Tatzel at last showed startlement. “And you were repelled?”



“To the contrary. We left the citadel intact only because we had brought no siege engines. We destroyed everything in sight, then rode off to do battle elsewhere.”

Tatzel stared at him in wonder. “That is a cruel deed!”

“It is no more than long-delayed justice, and it is only a start.”

Tatzel looked glumly into the flames. “And what do you propose to do with me?”

“I have impressed you into servitude after the Ska style. You are now my

slave. Henceforth, conduct yourself accordingly.”

“That is not possible!” cried Tatzel furiously. “I am Ska and of noble birth!”

“You must adjust yourself to the idea. It is a pity that you have broken your leg and so cannot obey my commands.”

Tatzel, leaning on the table with chin on her two fists, scowled into the fire.

Aillas rose to his feet and spread her cloak across the bed of grass. “Chew some of the willow bark, that you may sleep without pain.”

“I want no more bark.”

Aillas bent over her. “Put your arms around my neck and I will carry you to the bed.”

After a moment’s hesitation Tatzel obeyed, and Aillas transferred her to the bed of grass. He unlaced the thongs of her boots and drew them from her feet. “Are you comfortable?”

Tatzel looked up at him blank-faced as if she had not heard the question. Aillas turned away, and went outside to listen to the night.

The air was still. He heard the murmur of water in the river but otherwise silence. He returned into the hut. Tilting

up the table, he placed it across the doorway, and wedged it in place with the bench. He banked the fire and after removing his own boots, lay down beside Tatzel and covered them over with his cloak. He looked toward the pale blotch of Tatzel's face. "Have you ever slept with a man before?"

"No."

Aillas gave a noncommittal grunt. "Thanks to the broken leg your virginity is secure. It would be too much distraction to hear you yelping in pain because your leg was hurting... . I suppose that I am a man of too many niceties."

Tatzel made a scornful sound but otherwise had nothing to say. She twisted about so that her back was toward Aillas, and presently he heard her regular breathing.

In the morning the sun rose into a cloudless day. Aillas brought hardtack and cheese from his wallet for their breakfast. Immediately after he took Tatzel to a secluded little glen fifty yards up the ravine behind the hut. Tatzel protested and grumbled but Aillas was firm. "These hills are not unknown to true bandits who are little more than wild animals. I lack bow and arrow and if there were more than two I could not protect you. If more than two Ska found

us, I could not protect myself. So you must hide during the day until we leave this place.”

“When will that be?” demanded Tatzel, somewhat peevishly.

“As soon as possible. Do not stir from here until I come for you. Unless several days go by; then you will know that I am dead.”

Aillas returned to the valley. From a crook of driftwood and a pole cut from a birch sapling he contrived a crutch. He cut a strong willow branch, scraped and shaved it and produced a bow of no great quality, since willow lacked the

strong resilience of ash or yew. Hickory and oak were too brittle; alder was too weak; horse-chestnut served tolerably well, but none grew to hand. He cut willow shoots for arrows and fletched them with ribbons of trailing cloth.

Finally he contrived a fishing-spear by splitting one end of a birch pole into four prongs, sharpening each, wedging the prongs apart with a pebble, and lashing a foot from the end to prevent the pole from splitting along its whole length.

The time was now an hour into the afternoon. Aillas took his fishing spear to the river, and after an hour of the most patient and crafty effort, managed to spear a fine brown trout of three or four

pounds. As he cleaned the fish by the water's edge he heard the sounds of approaching horses and instantly took to cover.

Up the road came two mounted men, followed by a wagon drawn by a pair of shaggy farm-horses. A tow-headed peasant boy of fourteen drove the wagon. The riders were of a different, more sinister sort. They wore makeshift vests of chain and leather helmets with neck-and earflaps. Heavy long-swords slanted back from their belts; bows and arrows hung at their saddlebows, along with short-handled battle-axes. The larger of the two was somewhat older than Aillas, dark, burly, with small mean



eyes, a coarse beard and a fleshy beak of a nose. The other, older by perhaps fifteen years, rode crouched in the saddle, as lean, sinewy and tough as the leather on which he sat. His face was pale and disturbing; strangely wide cheekbones with round gray eyes and a small thin-lipped mouth gave him an almost ophidian semblance.

Aillas instantly knew the two for outlaws, and he congratulated himself on his foresight in hiding Tatzel up the gully, inasmuch as the riders had taken note of the dead horse, and were somewhat puzzled as to its significance.

Arriving at the hut the horsemen halted

and muttered together, then bent to examine tracks in the sand. Warily dismounting, they tied their horses to the wagon and started to approach the hut, then stopped short in surprise.

Aillas went cold and stiff with shock. Tatzel had also heard the approach of the horsemen. She came hobbling around the side of the hut and, facing the two, spoke in a voice of confident authority, though Aillas could not hear her words. She gestured toward the wagon; Aillas assumed that she had given instructions that she wished to be transported to the nearest Ska castle or administrative depot.

The two men looked at each other, grinning in some mutuality of understanding, and even the boy, gaping open-mouthed from the wagon, blinked in perplexity.

Aillas seethed with contradictory emotions: fury at the enormity of Tatzel's folly, then a gust of great sadness for what she must endure, then another surge of anger, of a different sort: no matter how he raged and cursed, he could not now withdraw from her troubles and hope to keep his self-respect. In her arrogance and vanity, Tatzel had endangered not only herself, but Aillas as well.

The two men approached Tatzel and halted close in front of her. They looked her up and down, and exchanged appreciative comments. Tatzel, drawing back, issued a set of desperate new commands.

The thin bent man put questions to Tatzel. She answered in icy tones and again gestured toward the wagon.

“Yes, yes,” the men seemed to say. “All in good time. But first things first! Great good fortune has brought the three of us together and we must celebrate our luck in proper style. A pity only that there are not two of you!”

Tatzel stumbled back another pace and looked desperately around the landscape. Aillas thought sardonically: 'Now she wonders why I do not rush forward to teach the ruffians a lesson.'

The burly bearded man leaned forward and seized Tatzel around the waist. He drew her close, and tried to kiss her. Tatzel twisted her head this way and that, but presently he found her mouth. The lean man tapped him on the shoulder and the two exchanged words, and the younger man sullenly drew back, either by reason of fear or by difference in status.

The older man spoke gently but with

effect, and the younger man gave a shrugging acquiescence. Together they prepared for a game, to determine who first would amuse himself with Tatzel. The younger man pushed a stick into the ground, and drew a line in the dirt at a distance of ten feet. Taking coins from their pouches, they stood behind the line and in turn tossed coins toward the stick. The boy, jumping down from the wagon, came to watch with what seemed a more than casual interest.

While their attention was distracted, Aillas ran behind the wagon. In front of the hut there was argument as to a possible breach of the rules, and the boy was called on as an arbiter. He rendered

a decision, and the game was played once again to the amended rules, though not without grumbling and the exchange of heated words between the two. Tatzel at the same time made furious expostulations, until she was commanded to silence, whereupon she stood back and watched with mouth drawn into a grimace.

During these events Aillas moved quietly to the horses and availed himself of a bow and a handful of arrows.

The game ended; the victor was the burly black-bearded man who laughed proudly and congratulated Tatzel on her luck. Once again he seized her and, with

a leer and a wink toward his comrade, took her into the hut.

The older man gave a dreary shrug, and growled an order to the boy, who ran off to the wagon and brought back a wallowing leather sack of wine. The two went to squat in the sunlight at the side of the hut.

Aillas quietly approached, arrow nocked to the string. He sidled to the doorway and, softly as a shadow, stepped inside. Tatzel lay sprawled naked on the grass bed. The bandit had dropped his breeches and kneeling at the ready groped to insert his monumental genital member. Tatzel saw the still



silhouette in the doorway and gasped; the bandit looked over his shoulder. He uttered an inarticulate curse and clambered to his feet, groping for his sword. He opened his mouth, to call out his rage; Aillas loosed the arrow. It hissed across the room, entered the open mouth, to pin the head to a post in the back wall, where the man died in dancing spasms of arms and legs.

Aillas returned outside as quietly as he had entered. Stepping around the corner, he found the older man leaning back with the wine-sack tilted high, while the boy watched in fascinated envy. The boy's eyes, looking past the wine-sack, focused upon Aillas; he gave a strangled

falsestto call. The bandit, rolling his pale gray eyes to the side, saw Aillas. He dropped the bag and scrambled to his feet, snatching at his sword. His face somber and grave, Aillas loosed his arrow. The bandit's knees buckled; he clawed briefly at the shaft protruding from his chest, then sagged to the ground.

Aillas went to look for the boy, and discovered him fleeing in great bounds and leaps down the road the way he had come, and a moment later he was gone from sight.

Aillas looked into the hut. Tatzel with eyes pensively downcast, was dressing herself, back turned to the corpse.

Aillas, also thoughtful, went to the wagon, which was covered by a tarpaulin of good waxed linen canvas. Below were a variety of provisions, in large quantity, sufficient to feed a dozen men for a month or more.

Aillas chose goods from the wagon: a sack of meal, two flitches of bacon, salt, two round cheeses, a sack of wine, a ham, a goodly bundle of onions, a crock of preserved goose, a rack of salt fish, a bag of raisins and dried apricots. He packed the supplies in the tarpaulin and loaded it upon the best of the draught horses, which now would carry the pack.

Tatzel came to sit in the doorway of the hut, where she demurely combed the short curling locks of her hair. Aillas remembered the crutch he had contrived for her use. After the briefest of hesitations, he went to get it, along with the trout he had speared. The crutch he gave to Tatzel. "This may help you to walk."

Aillas entered the hut, took up the two cloaks, shook them out, and gave a final glance to the corpse. The next person to enter the hut would discover a sight to startle him.

Returning into the wholesome outer air, Aillas said: "Come! Before long this

place will be swarming with Ska, depending on how far the boy must run with his news.”

Tatzel pointed up the trail. “Someone is coming now; best that you flee while you can save yourself.”

Turning to look, Aillas discovered an old man approaching with four goats. He wore garments of bast, straw sandals and a low widebrimmed hat of woven straw. Each of his goats carried a small pack. As he drew abreast of the hut, he turned an incurious glance from Aillas to Tatzel and would have passed without a word, had not Aillas called out: “Hold a moment, if you will.”

The old man halted, politely but without enthusiasm.

Aillas said: “I am strange to these parts; perhaps you can direct me.”

“I will do my best, sir.”

Aillas pointed down the valley. “Where does the road lead?”

“It is ten miles down to Glostra, which is a village and a Ska outpost, where they keep a goodly barracks.”

“And up the road?”

“There are several turnings. If one keeps

to the main trail he comes to the High Moor, and there he will find the Windy Way to Poelitzetz.”

Aillas nodded; this was more or less what he had expected. He signalled to the old man. “Come with me, and tie your goats to the wagon, if you like.”

The old man dubiously followed Aillas to the hut. Here Aillas showed him the two corpses. “They came up the road with the wagon. They attacked me and I killed them. Who are they?”

“In the hut with the beard: he is a half-breed Ska. The other is known as Fedrik the Snake. Both were bandits in the

service of Torqual, or so it is said.”

“Torqual. . . I have heard the name.”

“He is chief of the bandits, and his lair is Castle Ang, where he cannot be attacked.”

“Much depends upon who is attacking, and how,” said Aillas. “Where is the fort, so that we may avoid it?”

“Fifteen miles along the trail you will discover three pines by the road, with a ram’s skull nailed to each. Here the road forks. The way to the right leads to Ang. I have seen it once only, and the entry was guarded by two knights in full



armour impaled on stakes. I will go there never again.”

“I see that the second of your goats carries a good iron pannikin,” said Aillas. “Will you trade this pannikin for a horse, a wagon and a supply of victual as to keep you fat for a year?”

“The trade would seem to be fair, from my point of view,” said the old man cautiously. “These articles are naturally yours to bestow.”

“I have claimed them and no one disputes me. However, should we make the trade, I suggest that you take the goods as quickly as possible to some

secret place, if for no other reason than to forestall envy.”

“That is wise counsel,” agreed the old man. “I hereby effect the trade.”

“Further, you have never seen us and we have never seen you.”

“Precisely so. At this moment I hear only the echo of ghost-voices carried on the wind.”

## II

THE SUN SANK BEHIND AILLAS AND TATZEL as they rode up the valley, with the line to the pack horse

tied to the back of her saddle. Aillas carried both bows and both quivers.

The valley narrowed and rose at a gradient which caused the river to gurgle and tumble and leap when it came upon a boulder in its bed. Soft pines and cedars appeared in copses and single sentinels; draws and gullies entered the valley from either side, each with its trickle of a stream.

Late in the afternoon the wind began to rise and clouds raced overhead; rain might be approaching from the sea: a dismal prospect.

Sunset gilded the high mountain ridges;

the valleys began to fill with dusk. Aillas turned up one of the tributary valleys, and after about a hundred yards of leading his horse along the banks of a rivulet, came upon a grassy glade protected from the wind and where their fire could not be seen by night-wanderers along the road.

Tatzel was not pleased with the campsite and looked back and forth with disapproval. "Why do we stay at this rude place?"

"So that we may not be troubled during the night by strangers," explained Aillas.

"We are plunging ever more deeply into

wilderness. Where are you taking us, or do you know?"

"I hope to find a way serene and peaceful over the high moors, thence down into South Ulfland and so back to Doun Darric. Eventually I will take you to Domreis in Troicinet."

"I do not care to visit these places," said Tatzel coldly. "Do not my wishes carry weight?"

Aillas laughed. "You will discover that, as a slave, your wishes are entirely ignored."

Tatzel scowled and seemed not to hear.

Aillas collected wood, arranged rocks to form a fireplace, and while doing so discovered a fine sheet of hard green serpentine almost a foot square and no more than half an inch thick. He struck up a fire, laid out the trout, and turned to Tatzel who sat on a log nearby, watching the preparations with an air of boredom.

Aillas said: "Tonight you shall cook, while I put up a shelter against the weather."

Tatzel shook her head. "I know nothing of such things."

"I will explain what you must do. Cut fat from the ham, try it out slowly in the

pannikin, so that the fat does not smoke. Meanwhile cut the trout into pieces. When the fat is ready, fry the fish, with great care that the fish does not scorch. When the fish is nicely browned, put the pan aside. Then mix some meal with water, and make thin cakes. Press them down on the griddle, which will now be hot.” Aillas indicated the sheet of serpentine. “Turn the cakes when they are done on one side, and cook on the other side.”

“This is knowledge I do not care to learn.”

Aillas reflected. “I can cut a switch and beat you well, until you cry for mercy,

even though I am tired. Or I can do these tasks myself and serve you politely to your pleasure. Or I can let you go hungry and cold, which is the course of least exertion to myself. Which would you suggest?”

Tatzel cocked her head judiciously to the side, but made no recommendation.

Aillas said: “Truly, I do not care to beat you. I wish to serve you even less. So it seems that you must cook or go without your supper. And remember, in the morning, it will be the same all over again.”

Tatzel said scornfully: “I will eat



apricots and drink wine.”

“You will do nothing of the sort:  
Further, you may arrange your own bed.  
Or sit in the rain all night, for all I care.”

Tatzel looked glumly into the fire with  
arms clasped around her knees.

Meanwhile Aillas contrived a tent from  
the tarpaulin, then, gathering armfuls of  
rank grass, arranged a bed.

Tatzel, taking note that the bed was  
intended for a single person, uttered a  
sibilant curse, and furiously set about  
preparing the supper. Aillas thereupon  
gathered more grass and extended the  
bed.

The two ate in silence. For Aillas, food had never tasted better than this fried trout and griddlecakes, with slices of onion and gulps of wine. Overhead the wind sighed through the trees and the flames swirled back and forth. Aillas at last went to water the horses, and then tethered them where they could graze to advantage.

Tatzel watched him sidelong, but when he returned to the fire, she was once more brooding into the flames.

Aillas drank a final gulp from the wine-sack. Tatzel watched him covertly. Aillas smiled into the fire. "Where did you hide my knife?" This was the knife

with which Tatzel had cut the trout into pieces.

Tatzel pondered a moment, then reached inside her tunic and drew the knife from the waist-band of her trousers. Aillas reached out quickly and took the knife.

Tatzel rubbed her wrist. "You hurt me."

"Not so much as you might have hurt me while I slept."

Tatzel responded with a bored shrug. After a moment Aillas rose to his feet. He carried such of the provisions as might be damaged by rain to the shelter of the tent. Now he took up the bows and

tested first one, then the other, gauging smoothness, power and strength of construction. Both were good bows, but one was better and this, with the arrows, he tucked under the grass where he would sleep, convenient to his hand, but not available to the reach of Tatzel's fingers. The other bow he put on the fire and burned.

Tatzel watched with her mouth drooping. "I am truly perplexed."

"Indeed? What is it this time?"

"Why do you stubbornly hold me captive? My own preference is to be free, and I only impede you on your

journey. Apparently you do not even intend to use me as a woman.”

Aillas thought back across the events of the day. He muttered: “I could not bring myself to touch you.”

“Most peculiar! Suddenly you respect my rank!”

“Wrong.”

“Because of the bandit, then.” Tatzel blinked, and Aillas thought he saw tears glistening in her eyes. “What could I gain by fighting? I am in the power of Otherlings: escaped slaves and bandits; now I am apathetic. Do as you like with

me.”

Aillas made a scornful sound. “Save your dramatics. I told you last night and again tonight: I would never force myself upon you.”

Tatzel looked at him sidelong. “Then what are your plans? I am mystified by your conduct.”

“It is quite simple. I was enslaved and compelled to serve you at Castle Sank, to my abiding fury. I swore that some day there would be an accounting. Now you are the slave and you must serve me according to my whims. What could be simpler? There is even a kind of beauty

in the symmetry of events. Try to enjoy this artful beauty as much as I do!”

Tatzel merely compressed her lips, “I am not a slave! I am the Lady Tatzel of Castle Sank!”

“Those bandits, were they impressed with your rank?”

“They were Otherlings, but partly of Ska blood.”

“What is the relevance of that? They were both depraved. I killed them with pleasure.”

“With arrows and ambushes,” sneered

Tatzel. "You dare not confront the Ska otherwise."

Aillas made a wry face. "In a certain sense, that is true. So far as I am concerned, war is neither a game nor an occasion for gallantry, but rather an unpleasant event to be settled with the least possible hurt for one's self. ... Do you know of a Ska named Torqual?"

At first Tatzel seemed disinclined to answer. Then she said: "I know of Torqual. He is a third cousin to me. But I have seen him only once. He is no longer considered Ska, and now he is gone to another land."



“He has returned, and his den is up yonder, under Noc. Tonight we have drunk his wine and consumed his onions. The trout was my own.”

Tatzel looked off down the gully where a nocturnal beast had caused a rustling among the leaves. She looked back to Aillas. “Torqual is said to keep close reckonings. I suspect that you will pay a dear price for your feast.”

“I much prefer to enjoy Torqual’s bounty free of charge,” said Aillas. “Still, no one knows how the future will go. It is a dark and awful country, this North Ulfland.”

“I have never found it so,” said Tatzel in a reasonable voice.

“You have never been a slave until now... Come. It is time we were asleep. The wagon-boy will talk everywhere of the noble Ska lady, and the valley will swarm with Ska soldiers. I want to make an early start.”

“Sleep, then,” said Tatzel indifferently. “I will sit up for yet a little while.”

“Then I must tie you with rope lest you wander off during the night. In these places odd creatures move about in the dark; would you want to be dragged down into a cave?”

With poor grace Tatzel limped over to the bed. “We still must use the rope for the sake of security. I sleep soundly, and I might never awake if during the night a rock fell upon my head.” He passed the rope around Tatzel’s waist, made it fast in a tight-bowline which she could not untie, and secured the ends to his own waist, thus constraining her close beside him.

Tatzel lay down and Aillas covered her with her cloak. The moon, three-quarters full, shone through a rift in the leaves and played full upon her face, softening her features and causing her to seem entrancingly pretty. For a moment Aillas looked down at her, wondering as to the

quality of the half-sleepy half-scornful smile which momentarily twitched at her mouth. ... He turned away, before images could form in his mind and, lying down beside her, covered himself with his own cloak... . Had he overlooked anything? Weapons? All secure. Rope? The knots were out of her reach. He relaxed and presently fell asleep.

### III

AILLAS AROSE AN HOUR BEFORE DAWN. There had been no rain and he discovered a live coal among the ashes. He covered it with dry grass and blew up a fire. Yawning and shivering, Tatzel

crept from her bed and huddled before the blaze, warming her hands. Aillas brought out bacon and the sack of meal, which Tatzel pretended not to notice. Aillas spoke a few terse words; after scowling and darting a glance at his back, Tatzel set herself to frying bacon and baking griddlecakes. Aillas saddled the horses and made them ready for the trail.

In the dewy pre-dawn stillness Aillas and Tatzel ate their breakfast, and neither chose to speak.

Aillas loaded the packhorse, helped Tatzel into the saddle and they departed the ravine. Coming to the trail Aillas

stopped to look and listen, but discovered no evidence of traffic, and once again the two set off up the valley, and all the while Aillas kept a close watch down the valley behind them.

They rode through perilous territory. Aillas pushed the horses to their best speed, that they might pass by the fork to Castle Ang as early in the day as possible.

As the miles passed by, the landscape became ever more grand. At the sides of the valley cliffs reared high, sometimes lofting above tumblers of boulders, sometimes rising from stands of massive pines and firs.

The sun appeared above the eastern ridge and shone upon three pines standing tall beside the trail, with a ram's skull nailed to the trunk of each. At this place the road forked, one way leading off to the right. With alacrity and a lightening of the spirit Aillas rode past the ominous fork and put it out of sight behind them.

The horses began to labor, both for the pace Aillas had set and for the gradient of the trail. Up, up, and up, traversing and twisting, back and forth under hanging ledges and bulging boulders, across an occasional mountain meadow: so went the trail, thence once again up on a new slant.

An hour after passing the fork to Ang, Aillas led the way to a secluded nook at the back of a forest of pines. He dismounted, and helped Tatzel to the ground. Here they would rest during the middle of the day, and so lessen the chances of meeting other riders, who, in these regions, could only be sources of danger. Tatzel seemed to feel that prudence of this sort was both furtive and ludicrous. "You are as timid as a rabbit," she told Aillas. "Do you live your life in fear, always peeking and peering, and jerking about wide-eyed at a whisper?"

"You have found me out," said Aillas. "I cringe to a thousand fears. It must be the



ultimate abasement when a man is considered a coward by his own slaves.”

Tatzel uttered a jeering laugh and stretched herself out on a sunny patch of sand.

Aillas leaned back against a tree and looked around the skyline. Despite all, Tatzel’s comments had irked him. Could she truly think him timid, merely for exercising ordinary caution? More than likely so. In her own experience, men travelled the countryside without dreading unpleasant events. “Before long the Ska will be peeking and peering too,” Aillas told her. “They are no

longer chivvying a few poor peasants from pillar to post; now they have the Troice to contend with and this is a far different matter.”

“If all Troice are as prudent as you, we are in little difficulty.”

“So it may be,” said Aillas. Again he searched the skyline, but discovered only rock and air. Ragged clouds racing along the wind, passed from time to time in front of the sun, with their swift shadows following up the valley.

Tatzel, lying with her head on her arms watched him. “What are you looking for?”

“Someone keeping watch from the ridge... . Rest while you can. From now on we ride by night.”

Tatzel closed her eyes and presently seemed to sleep.

At noon they ate ham and cheese and cold griddlecakes. The sun passed across the zenith. Clouds came in greater numbers, and soon the sun was lost behind an overcast. Tatzel, huddling in her cloak, grumbled at the chilly gusts of wind, and recommended that Aillas erect the tent.

Aillas shook his head. “This is coward’s weather! Scouts and sentinels are

blinded by the mist, and bandits rob only when the weather is fine. Come! We ride!”

He bundled away the ham and cheese and once more they set off up the trail.

The afternoon passed slowly and without comfort. An hour before sunset the winds decreased to puffs and gusts, while the overcast cracked and broke. A dozen beams spurted down at the wild landscape, bringing clots of color to the otherwise drab scenery.

Aillas halted to rest the horses. As he looked back the way they had come, the full scope of the valley opened before

him, and now, only a mile ahead, the edge of the plateau cut across the sky.

Aillas led the way up the trail, though once again he felt exposed to the observation of any who might be guarding the valley.

The trail arrived at the final steep slope; Aillas dismounted to spare his horse. Back and forth he trudged: step after slow step, until he too became winded and paused to catch his breath, the horses, bobbing their heads and snorting softly, gradually recovered from their exertions. Deep shade surrounded the group, with beams from the low sun breaking through rifts to illuminate banks

and reefs of cloud to the east.

Aillas once more started up the trail: back, forth, back, forth, and with a last surge, came up and out upon the plateau. To the south stood the Cloudcutters; to the east rose the final ridge of the Teach tac Teach, now burning in the sunset light; to the north the plateau became lost in fog and low clouds.

A hundred feet away a tall man in a black cape brooded over the landscape. He stood as if in deep thought, hands resting on the pommel of his sword, with the tip of the scabbard resting on the ground before him. His horse stood tied to a nearby shrub. He glanced aside at

Aillas and Tatzel, then seemed to ignore them, which suited Aillas well enough.

Aillas set off along the trail, passing the man by as if he were not there.

The man turned slowly to face them, so that the sunset light modeled his features in dark gold and black. He spoke a single word: “Hold!”

Aillas politely reined up his horse, and the man came slowly forward. Black hair hung close beside a low forehead with saturnine eyebrows and luminous hazel eyes below. Harsh cheekbones, a mouth wide and shapely, if somewhat heavy, above a short heavy chin, along

with a flickering muscle of the left cheek, gave an impression of passionate strength dominated, if only barely, by a sardonic intelligence. He spoke again, in a voice at once harsh and melodious: “Where do you go?”

“We travel along the Windy Way and down into South Ulfland,” said Aillas. “Who, sir, are you?”

“My name is Torqual.” His eyes became fixed upon Tatzel. He murmured: “And who is this lady?”

“She is in my service, at the moment.”

“Lady, are you not Ska?”



“I am Ska.”

Torqual moved somewhat closer. He was a strong man, thought Aillas: broad of shoulder, deep of chest, narrow in the flanks. Here was a man, he thought, whom Tatzel would think neither furtive nor timid, nor even prudent.

Torqual spoke in lilting melodious tones: “Young man, I claim your life. You trespass upon a territory which I consider my own. Dismount and kneel before me, that I may strike off your head with fullest ease. You shall die in this tragic golden light of sunset.” He drew sword from his scabbard with a whine of steel on steel.

Aillas said courteously: "Sir, I prefer not to die, and certainly not upon my knees. I will ask your permission to cross this land which you claim, with my goods and my company put to no peril."

"The permission is denied, though indeed you speak with a good and easy voice. Still, it is all one."

Aillas dismounted and drew his own sword, which was slim and light, and which suited the style of sword-play he had learned in Troicinet. His knife? Where was his knife, upon which he relied? He had cut cheese for their noonday meal, and had packed the knife away with the cheese.

Aillas said: “Sir, before we continue with this matter, may I offer you a bite of cheese?”

“I care for no cheese, though it is an amusing concept.”

“In that case, allow me a moment while I cut a morsel or two for myself, as I hunger.”

“I have no time to spare while you eat cheese; prepare instead for death.” With this, Torqual advanced a step and slashed out with his sword. Aillas jumped aside and the stroke went for naught. Torqual swung again but the stroke slid off Aillas’ blade.

Aillas feinted a lunge, but Torqual's heavy blade darted up and Aillas would have been spitted had he attempted more, and he understood that Torqual was a swordsman of skill as well as strength.

Torqual again attacked, driving Aillas back, and Aillas fended off a series of blows any of which might have cut him in two, apparently each time by a hair's-breadth. On the last stroke Aillas counterthrust savagely, touching Torqual's shoulder, and Torqual was forced to jerk back with an effort in order to recover. Aillas now took note that Torqual carried a knife at his belt.

Torqual's mouth drooped in concentration; he had not expected quite so much exercise. Again he struck, and Aillas lunged hard, throwing up his left arm in an awkward manner which exposed his left side. Torqual attempted a tricky backhanded blow, which Aillas effortlessly slid aside, and lunging again threw up his left arm in the the same awkward fashion.

Torqual lunged; Aillas countered and thrust home, drawing blood from the side of Torqual's chest, missing his heart only by inches. Torqual's mouth drooped and his eyes widened; otherwise he ignored the wound. Aillas noticed now that his hand had gone to his

knife.

Torqual again made play and again Aillas fended away his blows, and Torqual seemed to allow an opening for a lunge. Aillas stepped forward, thrust his left arm high, exposing his left side; instantly Torqual struck out with the knife, except that Aillas stabbed out his sword and plunged the blade through the inner side of Torqual's elbow, so that the point emerged beyond and the knife dropped from the suddenly nerveless hand.

Aillas pounced upon the knife and caught it up almost before it struck the ground. He grinned at Torqual, and now began to

press the fight: thrusting, lunging, the tip of his sword moving beyond Torqual's ability to fend it off. "Kneel, Torqual," said Aillas, "so that I may kill you with less effort." Aillas swung the tip of his sword in a circle, dodged, feinted, thrust, and Torqual was forced back, step by step.

Torqual drew a deep breath, and venting a great yell, charged with sword swinging like a scythe. Aillas retreated and momentarily Torqual's chest was exposed. Aillas threw the knife with all his force; it sank to the hilt into Torqual's chest. He staggered backward, dumbfounded. Aillas lunged and thrust his sword through Torqual's

neck. Torqual cried out in woe and tottered backward over the edge of the plateau. He fell and rolled: down, down, and down, and at last, coming to rest, was merely a black anonymous bundle.

Aillas looked around. Where was Tatzel? She was already two hundred yards away, riding at best speed to the north, though somewhat slowed by the pack animal which Aillas had tied to her horse, as well as Aillas' horse which he had tied to the pack horse. Tatzel therefore rode at an awkward canter which still would have been sufficient to leave Aillas behind, had it not been for Torqual's horse.



Tatzel looked back over her shoulder; Aillas saw the desperate flash of her face, and might have been angry except for the exultation of his victory over Torqual.

He untied Torqual's horse, mounted and gave chase. And again he became angry that Tatzel had chosen to flee north, ever farther into the wilderness which extended all the way to the Godelian border.

At the thought a new concept entered Aillas' mind, which he considered a moment, then rejected. It was too flamboyant, too brash, and probably impractical... . The thought recurred.

Was it truly impractical? Probably, and reckless as well. On the other hand, when all was said and done, it might be the boldest and bravest stroke of all.

Tatzel rode on with grim determination, hoping that Aillas' horse would fall and break a leg. She had a long lead; miles went by before Aillas caught her.

Without comment he took up the reins of her horse, and slowed it to a walk.

Tatzel sat glowering, but had nothing to say. By the light of the afterglow Aillas made camp in a little spinney of mountain larch, and on this evening for their supper they dined upon Torqual's preserved goose.



# Chapter 12

## I

WINDS BLEW ACROSS THE HIGH MOORS, moaning and sighing through the larch trees. Covered by the tarpaulin, with Tatzel taut and sullen beside him, Aillas watched clouds flying across the moon.

There was much to consider. Even now in South Ulfland his absence may not yet have been noticed, each of his staff believing him to be elsewhere. Still, when all was weighed in the balance—here Aillas smiled a rueful smile to the

moon-he would have done the same deeds, and endured the same hardships all over again, if only to gain those fresh perceptions which had banished some of the clutter from his mind. Further and beyond all else, a wonderful new scheme had burst into his mind. Tatzel would discover a new bewilderment, and the thought prompted Aillas to chuckle aloud.

Tatzel, also lying awake and staring up at the moon, found Aillas' amusement totally at discord with her own mood. She asked resentfully: "Why are you laughing?" Then, as Aillas made no immediate reply, she said: "When men are bereft of their senses, they laugh up

at the moon.”

Aillas chuckled once more. “Your ingratitude has curdled my brain. I laugh so that I may not cry.”

Tatzel made a scornful sound. “Your vanity is inflated because Torqual stumbled and fell.”

“Poor Torqual! I neglected to warn him that fighting with strangers might be dangerous, and he suffered a fearful injury! Kindly Torqual, modest and good! His demise<sup>20</sup> brings sorrow to us all!”

Tatzel said no more, and so the night

passed.

In the morning, as they ate their breakfast crouched over a small reeking red fire, Aillas looked across the moors and discovered, not half a mile distant, a caravan of Ska horsemen leading a dozen wagons piled high with bales and, behind, a column of two or three dozen men linked neck to neck with ropes.

Aillas instantly extinguished the fire lest a wisp of smoke draw attention from the riders. He told Tatzel: “Yonder is the Windy Way; it leads to Poelitetz. I have come this way before.”

Tatzel watched wistfully as the caravan

passed by, and Aillas could not suppress a pang of pity and even a trace of guilt. Was it just to visit vengeance for all the wrongs done to him upon the head of one young girl?

He gave an angry answer to himself: Why not? She was Ska; she shared and endorsed the Ska philosophy; she had shown never an iota of pity or concern for the slaves at Castle Sank: why should she be exempt from retribution?

Because the Ska style of life was not of her contriving, came the answer. She had assimilated Ska precepts with her mother's milk; they had been given to her as axioms of existence; she was Ska



willy-nilly, through no choice of her own!

But the same could be said of any Ska, man or woman, old or young, and she showed no sign whatever of altering her point of view. She simply refused to accept Aillas' assertion that she was now herself a slave. In short, she was as guilty as any other Ska, and tender emotions in this case were irrelevant.

Still, there was no denying that Aillas had singled out Tatzel for special attention, although he had envisioned none of their present hardships. He had wanted only to-what? To force her to recognize him as a person of worth. To

make real the daydreams he had fabricated at Castle Sank. To indulge himself in the pleasure of her companionship. To enter intimately into her life and thoughts, to gain her good opinion, to excite her amorous yearnings... . Again Aillas felt sardonic amusement. Those goals, formed with such innocent fervor, now all seemed absurd. At any time he could put Tatzel to those erotic uses which she apparently at least half-expected, and which, so Aillas' instinct told him, she might not have found entirely unwelcome. Often, when he felt her warm presence beside him, the urge to abandon all restraint was almost overpowering. But whenever lust started to cook inside his

brain, a whole cluster of ideas intervened to quench the fire. First, what he had seen upon entering the hut had sickened him and the image hung in his mind. Second, Tatzel had possessed herself of his knife, and he could only believe that she had meant to kill him, a thought which dampened his ardor. Third, Tatzel, a Ska, thought him a hybrid of the ancient beetle-browed cannibals and true man, and a creature lower in the evolutionary scale than herself: in short, an Otherling. Fourth, since he could not woo Tatzel in the ordinary fashion, pride dissuaded him from taking her by force, for the sheer relief of his glands, with no thought for

all the other considerations. If Tatzel were amorously inclined, let her make the first move: naturally, a farfetched possibility. Although-perhaps he only imagined this-sometimes he felt as if Tatzel were taunting him, daring him to take her, and possibly she burned with some of the same urges which beset him.

An irksome problem. Perhaps some day, or some evening, when conditions were right, he would learn the truth of how she felt, and perhaps the daydreams would be realized in full and breathtaking totality. Meanwhile, the caravan had passed.

“Come!” he said gruffly. “It is time we

were riding.”

Aillas had long since recovered his knife from the cheese. He made up the pack, which he loaded upon the horse he had previously ridden, while he mounted Torqual’s strong black stallion, and the previous packhorse carried nothing.

Aillas helped Tatzel into the saddle and they were once more underway, but now they rode into the north.

As Aillas had expected, Tatzel was sorely bewildered by the choice of direction, and finally blurted out a question: “Why do we ride to the north? South Ulfland is behind us!”

“True: a long hard journey, with Ska and other bandits as thick as flies along the way.”

“Still: why ride north?”

“Ahead is the road from the Foreshore to Poelitetz. Beyond is wilderness, all the way to Godelia. The land is empty; there are neither bandits nor Ska to plunder us. At Dun Cruighre we will find a Troice ship and return to South Ulfland in comfort.”

Tatzel looked at him as if she doubted his sanity, then gave her apathetic shrug.

An hour later they came upon the road

leading from the Foreshore to the great mountain redoubt Poelitetz. Discovering no traffic to right or to left, Aillas put the horses to their best speed, and crossed the road unchallenged.

All day they rode across trackless moor. Far to the east stood the guardian ridge which here separated Dahaut from North Ulfland. To west and north the moor melted into haze. On this high tableland only furze and sedge and coarse grasses prospered, with an occasional cluster of windbeaten yews or a spinney of ragged larches. Sometimes a hawk flew overhead, on the lookout for quail or young rabbits, and crows flapped across the desolate distance.

As the afternoon passed, a float of heavy black clouds appeared in the west: first a line of scud which quickly advanced to loom across the sky; a storm was surely in the offing, with a dreary night ahead. Aillas accelerated the pace of his company and gave keen attention to the landscape, in the hope of discovering some semblance of shelter.

The outriders of the storm passed across the sun, creating a scene of melancholy magnificence. Beams of golden light played across the moor, and shone full upon a low cottage with walls of whitewashed stone and a roof slabbed over with thick turf from which grew tufts of grass and clover. Smoke issued



from the chimney, and in the yard adjacent to the byre Aillas noted a dozen sheep and as many fowl.

With hopes high he approached the cottage, and dismounted near the door. At the same time he signaled to Tatzel: “Down from your horse! I am not in the mood for another crazy chase across the moors.”

“Help me then; my leg pulses with pain.”

Aillas lifted Tatzel to the ground, then, together, the two approached the cottage.

Before they could knock, the door swung wide to reveal a short sturdy man of

middle years, round and red of face with orangered hair cut to overhang his ears like the eaves of a house.

“Our good wishes to you, sir,” said Aillas. “Our business here is ordinary: we seek food and shelter during this stormy night for which we will pay in suitable degree.”

“I can provide shelter,” said the crofter. “As for payment, ‘suitable’ for me might be ‘unsuitable’ for you. Sometimes these misunderstandings put folk at the outs.”

Aillas searched the contents of his wallet. “Here is a silver half-florin. If this will suffice, we have eliminated the

problem.”

“Well spoken!” declared the crofter.

“The times of the world would flow in halcyon joy, if everyone were so open-hearted and forthright as you! Give me the coin.”

Aillas tendered the half-florin piece.

“Whom do I address?”

“You may know me as Cwyd. And you, sir, and your mistress?”

“I am Aillas, and this is Tatzel.”

“She seems somewhat morose and out of sorts. Do you beat her often?”

“I must admit that I do not.”

“There is the answer! Beat her well; beat her often! It will bring the roses to her cheeks! There is nothing better to induce good cheer in a woman than a fine constitutional beating, since they are exceptionally jolly during the intervals in an effort to postpone the next of the series.”

A woman came to join them. “Cwyd speaks the truth! When he raises his fist to me I laugh and I smile, with all the good humour in the world, for my head is full of merry thoughts. Cwyd’s beating has well served its purpose! Nevertheless Cwyd himself becomes

gloomy, through bafflement. How did the roaches find their way into his pudding? Where except in Cwyd's smallclothes are household nettles known to grow? Sometimes as Cwyd dozes in the sunlight, a sheep wanders by and urinates in his face. Ghosts have even been known to skulk up behind Cwyd in the dark and beat him mercilessly with mallets and cudgels."

Cwyd nodded. "Admittedly, when Threlka is beaten for her faults, there is often a peculiar aftermath! Nonetheless, the basic concept is sound. Your mistress has the look of costive asthenia, as if she were an arsenic-eater."

“I think not,” said Aillas.

“In that case, a thrashing or two might well release the bile into her blood, and soon she would be skipping and singing and larking about with the rest of us. Threlka, what is your opinion?” Aside, he told Aillas: “Threlka is a witch of the seventh degree, and is wise beyond most others.”

“In the first place, the girl has a broken leg,” said Threlka. “Tonight I will mend the break, and then she will know less dole. But singing and larking? I think not. She is fey.”

“Sound opinions,” said Cwyd. “Now

then, Aillas, let us deal with your horses, while the storm still gathers strength. Tonight it will be a mighty display, and conceivably a single silver coin is poor recompense for the misery I am sparing you.”

“This sort of afterthought often spoils a promising friendship,” said Aillas.

“No matter how reasonable its basis?” asked Cwyd anxiously.

“Trust, once established, must never become the plaything of avarice! This was my father’s wise dictum.”

“The proposition seems generally

sound,” admitted Cwyd. “Still, it must be remembered that ‘friendship’ is temporal, while ‘reason’ transcends both human caprice and time itself.”

“And ‘avarice’?”

Cwyd pondered. “I would define ‘avarice’ as a consequence of the human estate: a condition arising from turbulence and inequality. In none of the paradises, where conditions are no doubt optimum, does ‘avarice’ exert force. Here, we are men struggling toward perfection and ‘avarice’ is a station along the way.”

“That is an interesting point,” said



Aillas. “Am I correct in my belief that I have felt the first drops of rain?”

The horses were stabled and fed generous wisps of hay. Aillas and Cwyd returned to the main room of the cottage.

For supper Threlka set out a savory soup of onions, greens, barley and mutton, with milk, bread and butter, while Aillas contributed what remained of the potted goose, as well as a goodly portion of cheese. Meanwhile the wind howled and roared and rain battered in a steady hard tattoo on the turf roof. A dozen times Aillas gave thanks to the providence which had afforded them shelter.

The same ideas had occurred to Cwyd. He said: "Hear how the storm yells, like a giant in pain!" And again, with russet eyes fixed knowingly upon Aillas: "Pity the poor traveller who must brave such ferocities! And all the while we sit snug before our fire!" And again: "In conditions like this the word 'avarice' loiters sickly by the wayside while the concept 'gratitude' marches forward in triumph, like Palaemon's conquering army!"

Aillas responded: "When storms rage, then is when folk become aware of their common humanity, and like you and Threika, they willingly extend hospitality to those unfortunate enough to

be at disadvantage, just as you, in your hour of inconvenience, will hope for the same! In these cases, the thought of payment is cause for embarrassment, and the host cries out: ‘What do you take me for? A jackal?’ It is heartwarming to meet such folk out here on the high moors!”

“Exactly so!” cried Cwyd. “Out here on the high moors where conditions are hard, ‘sharing’ is the watchword, and each gives of what he has without stint! I open my larder wide and light my best and most cheerful blaze; you are of the same disposition with your superfluity of silver coins; thus we honour each other!”

“Precisely to the point!” declared Aillas. “I will reckon up my little store of coins and whatever I find to be superfluous you shall have! We are in accord; let us say no more on the subject.”

When supper was done, Threika sat Tatzel in a chair with her leg propped upon a stool. She cut away the dark green breeches, which were now soiled and stained. “This is not a good color for healing. We will find you ordinary clothes, by which you will profit. You may remove your tunic as well... . Come, girl,” she said as Tatzel hesitated. “Cwyd cares nothing for your breasts; he has seen them by the hundreds on cows

and sheep, and they are all the same. Sometimes I think that modesty is merely a ploy so that we can pretend a difference to the animals. Alas! We are very much alike. But here! If you are uncomfortable, wear this blouse.”

Threika cut away the splint and threw it into the fire. “Burn, wood, burn! Pain, in smoke fly up the chimney; disturb Tatzel no longer!” From a black jar she poured a syrup upon Tatzel’s leg, then sprinkled on crushed dry leaves. She wound the shin with a loose bandage and tied it with a coarse red string. “And so it goes! In the morning you shall know no more weakness.”

“Thank you,” said Tatzel with a wan smile. “The splint was most tiresome. How may I pay you for your healing?”

“I want nothing but the pleasure of your smile,” said Threika. “Oh, if you wish, give me three hairs of your head for remembrance; that shall suffice.”

“It is not enough,” said Aillas. “Here is a silver penny, worth a whole head of hair, and also useless in magic, should it fall into improper hands.”

“Yes, that is wisdom,” Cwyd agreed. “And now it is time to sleep.”

All night long the storm wailed and

roared across the moors, and only began to slacken with the coming of day. The sun rose in a cataclysmic welter of black, white, red, pink and gray; then seemed to assert itself and from a peculiarly black sky sent long low shafts of rosecoloured light across the moors.

Cwyd blew up the fire and Threika prepared porridge, which the group consumed with milk, berries and rashers of fried bacon provided by Aillas.

Threika removed the bandage from Tatzel's leg, and threw the bandage into the fire with an incantation. "Rise now, Tatzel, and walk! Once more you are whole!"

Cautiously Tatzel tested the leg and discovered neither pain nor stiffness, much to her pleasure.

Aillas and Cwyd went to saddle the horses, and Aillas asked: “If I were to question you about the lands I intend to travel, would you be happy if in gratitude I made you a present of several copper pennies?”

Cwyd mused. “Our conversations have raised a number of interesting points. I could describe every turn of a long road, reciting each of the perils to be found along the way and its remedy, thus saving your life a dozen times, and you would gratefully reward me with a bag



of gold. However, if I casually mentioned that the man you wished to see at the end of this road were dead, you might thank me but give me nothing, though all went to the same effect. Is there not an inherent disequilibrium at work here?"

"Yes indeed," said Aillas. "The paradox resides once again in the distortions worked upon the fabric of our life by greed. I suggest that we free ourselves of this ignoble vice, and seek to help each other with full and wholehearted zeal."

Cwyd grumbled: "In short, you refuse to pay me what my information is worth?"

“If you saved my life even once, how should I pay you? The concept is meaningless. For this reason such services are generally held to be free.”

“Still, if I saved your life a dozen times, as well as your father and mother and the virtue of your sister, and you gave me a single copper groat, at least I could put my belly up to the board and drink a mug of beer to your health.”

“Very well,” said Aillas. “Tell me all you know. It may be worth a copper groat.”

Cwyd threw his hands in the air. “At least in dealing with you I exercise my

tongue... . Where do you fare?"

"North to Dun Cruighre in Godelia."

"You have come the proper route. A day's ride to the north the moors end at a great declivity: the Cam Brakes. This is a series of ledges or terraces arranged like steps, which, according to myth, the giant Cam laid out to ease his way from Lake Quyvem up to the moors. On the first, or topmost, brake, you will find many ancient tombs; give them all due respect. This place was sacred to the ancient Rhedaspian, who inhabited the land three thousand years ago. Ghosts are common, and it is said that sometimes old friendships are renewed

and old antagonisms find vent. If you by chance see such ghosts, make no sound and give no interference, and above all, never agree to act as arbiter at one of their ghostly tribunals. Act as if you see nothing nor hear nothing and they will ignore you. There is my first information.”

“And a good information it is!”

“On the second brake lives a ghoul who has the power to change his guise. It will meet you in sweet friendship, and offer wine and food and kindly shelter. Accept nothing-not so much as a sup of cold water-and cross down over this brake, no matter what the cost, while the

sun is in the sky; at sunset the ghoul assumes its true shape and your life is in the balance. If you take its gift you are lost. That is the second information.”

“It is even better than the first!”

“The third brake, which is in the middle, is fair and wholesome, and here you may rest, if you choose... . Still, I advise against entering any enclosure, hut or hole, and whatever benefits the land provides, give thanks to the god Spirifume, who rules this place and also a goodly duchy on the planet Mars. That is the third information.”

“Interesting, as always.”

“The fourth and fifth brakes are generally safe to the traveller, though all the brakes are haunted in some degree. Pass these by without delay. When you come to Lake Quyvern, you will discover Kernuun’s Antler, which is the inn of Dildahl the Druid. He is, so it seems, a kindly man, and offers a hospitality of moderate cost. This is hardly true and you must eat none of his fish! He will serve it in many guises: as roe, and croquettes, and pickles, and pudding, and in soup. Eat only the items whose cost is specified. This is the fourth information.”

“These are all valuable instructions.”

“The east shore of Lake Quayvern is unsafe owing to mires and bogs and morasses. The western shore is a place beyond my understanding. Arch-druids are rife, as well as a complementary sect of Arch-druidesses, with whom they hold social intercourse and discuss topics relating to their creed. At grand banquets it is said that they eat the flesh of children, in accordance with ancient ritual. The islands of Lake Quayvem are sacred to the druids, and if you set foot on them your life is forfeit. This is the fifth information.”

“Once more: most interesting! I am impressed by your knowledge!”

“Lake Quyvern empties into the River Solander, which flows north to the Skyre, and Godelia spreads before you like a bad smell. That is the sixth information.” And Cwyd made a gesture to signify that his tale was told, and stood smiling modestly, as if waiting for Aillas’ further applause.

Aillas said: “Ah, Cwyd, my dear fellow, your informations are most helpful. Are there more?”

Cwyd asked dolefully: “Have I not told enough?”

“You have done so, but you would not be withholding three or four other



informations, just in case I prove an ingrate for the first six?”

“No. I have fully and frankly disclosed all I know to your advantage.”

“Then here is a gold crown in exchange, and know that I have enjoyed this evening with you. Further, I will tell you this: I am favorably known to the magician Shimrod, and to the King of South Ulfland and Troicinet as well. Should events ever bring you near these persons, you need but mention my name and your needs will be met.”

“Sir, I am sorry to see you go: so much so that I offer you another day and night

at three-quarter rate!”

“Most generous!” said Aillas. “But we cannot delay.”

“In that case, I wish you good luck on your venture.”

## II

AILLAS AND TATZEL RODE AWAY from the cottage of Cwyd and Threlka. Tatzel now wearing a peasant's blouse and baggy breeches, cut of oatmeal-coloured homespun. She had bathed; the fresh garments and the curing of her leg put her almost in a cheerful frame of mind, sullied only by the presence of the

odious Aillas, who still pretended to regard himself as her master... . His manner was puzzling. At Sank, by his own admission, he had come to admire her, but now, out on these lonely moors, where he could do as he pleased, he acted as if under frigid constraint—perhaps the deference a house-servant owed a Ska lady of high birth?

Tatzel covertly studied Aillas. For an Otherling he was personable enough, and she had already noticed that he seemed quite clean. Last night, as she had listened to his conversation with Cwyd, she had been mildly surprised to hear talk so flexible and easy coming from the mouth of a one-time house-

servant. She recalled his duel with Torqual; he had attacked this universally feared Ska warrior with almost casual confidence, and in the end it was Torqual who had quailed.

Tatzel decided that Aillas did not think of himself as a house-servant. Why, then, had he kept so remote, even when, for sheer caprice and experiment, she had sought to arouse him? To just a trifling degree, of course, with events very much under her control, but still he had ignored her.

Might the deficiency lie in herself? Did she smell bad? Tatzel shook her head in puzzlement. The world was a strange

place. She looked around the landscape. After the storm the day was still and fresh, with a few lost clouds wandering the sky. Ahead the moors seemed to dissolve into air, partly by reason of water-haze and partly due to the Cam Brakes, where the land fell away in descending ledges.

At sunset Aillas elected to make camp, with the Brakes only a mile ahead. In the morning he waited until the sun was half an hour high before setting off to the north. Almost immediately they came to the verge of the brakes, with far regions spread before them and Lake Quyvern extending away from the foot of the fifth brake.

The faintest of trails led along the side of a stream which tumbled down into the first brake. After a few hundred yards the stream entered a steep-sided gulch and the trail, which evidently had been traced by wandering cattle, disappeared.

Dismounting, Aillas and Tatzel picked their way afoot down the slope and in due course arrived at the first brake: a pleasant meadow a mile or so wide spattered with red poppies and blue larkspur. Solitary oaks of great size stood at intervals, each with a hoary individuality of its own. At the back of the meadow an irregular line of tombs defied weather and time. Each displayed a plaque carved in the sinuous

Rhedaspian characters now incomprehensible to living men. Aillas wondered if the ghosts mentioned by Cwyd might be persuaded to read the inscriptions and thus contribute to the knowledge of contemporary scholars. It was an interesting idea, thought Aillas, which he must discuss at some later occasion with Shimrod.

Giving the tombs a wide berth, and observing no ghosts, Aillas and Tatzel rode to the edge of the brake, over and down toward the second brake. Again they traversed carefully back and forth, slipping and sliding on occasion, and at length came out upon the second brake.

Aillas instructed Tatzel: “Now we must be wary! According to Cwyd, an evil creature lives here, and he may appear in any guise. We must accept neither gifts nor favors! Do you understand? Take nothing whatever, from anyone or anything, or the ghoul will take your life! Now! Let us cross this brake with all possible speed.”

The second brake, like the first, was a long ribbon of meadow a mile or so wide. At intervals grew solitary oaks and on the left a forest of elm and horse-chestnut obscured their view to the west.

Halfway across they met a young man trudging up the brakes. He was stalwart



and handsome, with a fresh complexion, a crisp golden beard, and a head of short golden curls. He carried a staff, a rucksack and a small lute; a dagger hung at his belt. His brown smock and trousers were plain and serviceable; his green cap boasted a jaunty red feather. As he drew near Aillas and Tatzel he halted and raised his hand in greeting. “Bonaventure, and where do you ride?”

“Toward Godelia; that is our immediate destination,” said Aillas. “What of you?”

“I am a vagabond poet; I wander where the wind blows me.”

“It would seem a pleasant and careless life,” said Aillas. “Do you never yearn to find a true home for yourself?”

“It is a bittersweet dilemma. I often find places which urge me to tarry, and so I do, until I remember other places where I have found joys and marvels, and I am compelled again to my journey.”

“And no single place satisfies you?”

“Never. The place I seek is always beyond the far mountain.”

“I can offer you no sensible advice,” said Aillas. “Except this: do not delay your wandering here! Climb to the top of

the brakes before this day is done; you will live a longer life.”

The vagabond gave a carol of easy laughter. “Fear comes only to those already frightened. Today the most alarming sights have been several hummingbirds and a tangle of fine wild grapes which now I am tired of carrying.” He proffered fresh purple grapes in a pair of clusters to both Aillas and Tatzel.

Tatzel reached out in pleasure; Aillas, leaning, struck aside her arm and reined back the horses. “Thank you; we do not care to eat. On these brakes you are well-advised to take nothing and to give

nothing. Goodday to you.”

Aillas and Tatzel rode away, with Tatzel resentful. Aillas said shortly: “Did I not warn you to accept nothing while on this brake?”

“He did not seem a ghoul.”

“Would that not be his intent? Where is he now?” They looked back the way they had come but the young vagabond had vanished from view.

“It is very strange,” muttered Tatzel.

“As the ghoul himself asserted: the world is a place of marvels.”

Almost as Aillas spoke, a Hide girl in a white frock jumped up from under a tree where she had been tying garlands of wild-flowers. Her hair was long and golden; her eyes were blue; she was as pretty as one of her own flowers.

The girl came forward and spoke: "Sir and lady, where do you ride, and why in such haste?"

"To Lake Quyvem and beyond," said Aillas. "We ride in haste the sooner to join those we love. What of you? Do you always wander these wild places so freely?"

"This a region of peace. True, on

moonlit nights the ghosts come out and march to their ghostly music, and it is a sight to behold, since they wear armour of gold, black iron and silver, and helmets with tall crests. It is a fine sight to see!”

“So I should think,” said Aillas. “Where do you live? I see neither house nor hut.”

“Yonder, by the three oak trees: there is my home. Will you not come to visit? I was sent out to gather nuts but I have delayed among the flowers. Here: this garland is for you, since your face is so handsome and your voice so soft.”

Aillas jerked back his horse. “Away

with you and your flowers! They make me sneeze! Hurry now, before Tatzel pulls your nose! You will find no nuts under the poplar trees.”

The girl moved back and cried out: “You are a coarse cruel man, and you have made me cry!”

“No great matter.” Aillas and Tatzel rode away, leaving the little girl forlorn and wistful, but after a moment, when they turned to look back, she was gone.

The sun rose up the sky, and without further interruption they came to the edge of the brake. Aillas halted to pick out the best way down the slope; the packhorse,

meanwhile, took advantage of the occasion to lower its head and snatch a mouthful of grass from the meadow. Instantly, from behind a nearby tree came running an old man with a shock of white hair and a long white beard. “Hola!” he cried. “How dare you steal my good pasturage for your use, and almost under my very nose? You have compounded larceny and trespass with insolence!”

“Not so!” Aillas declared. “Your charges have no merit.”

“What! How can you contradict me? Each of us saw the dereliction in process!”



“I could testify to no dereliction,” said Aillas. “First, you have not marked off your property with a fence, as the law requires. Second, you have erected neither sign nor way-post challenging what in any case is our right by the common law: which is to say, harmless passage across unfilled meadows and pastures. Third, where are the cattle for which you are conserving this pasturage? Unless you can prove a damage, you have suffered no loss.”

“Legalisms! Sophistries! You have the sleight of words, by which poor peasants like me are mulcted and left helpless! Still, I would not have you think me a curmudgeon, and I hereby

make you a gift of that fodder  
sequestered from my private reserve by  
your horse.”

“I reject your gift!” declared Aillas.  
“Can you show articles from King Gax?  
If not, you can prove no title to the  
grass.”

“I need prove nothing! Here on the  
second brake, the giving of a gift is  
certified by acceptance. Your horse,  
acting as your agent, accepted the gift,  
and you therefore become an  
extensionary donee.”

At this moment the packhorse raised high  
its tail and voided the contents of its gut.

Aillas pointed to the pile of dung. “As you see, the horse tested your gift and rejected it. There is no more to be said.”

“Fie! That is not the same grass!”

“It is near enough, and we cannot wait while you prove otherwise. Goodday, sir!” Aillas and Tatzel led their horses over the brink and descended toward the third brake. From behind came a rageful howling and a tirade of curses, then a melodious voice calling: “Aillas! Tatzel! Come back, come back!”

“Make no acknowledgment,” Aillas warned Tatzel. “Do not even look back!”

“Why not?”

Aillas pulled his head down and bent forward. “You might see something you would rather not see. I have this hint from my instinct.”

Tatzel struggled with her curiosity but at last followed Aillas’ advice, and soon the calls were heard no more.

The descent was steep and the going slow; two hours into the afternoon they came down upon the third brake: another pleasant parkland of trees, meadows, grassy banks, ponds and small meandering streams.

Aillas looked around the serene landscape. “This is the brake in which the god Spirifume takes a special interest, and it seems as if he has dealt lovingly with the land.”

Tatzel looked about with no great interest.

Half an hour later, while riding through a grove of oak trees, they surprised a young boar rooting for acorns. Aillas instantly nocked an arrow to his bow, and said: “Spirifume, if yonder beast is of special value to you, cause the boar to jump aside or, if you prefer, divert my arrow.” He let the arrow fly, and it struck deep into the heart of the boar.

Aillas dismounted and, while Tatzel looked fastidiously in another direction, he did what needed to be done and presently came away with the choicest parts strung on a twig for convenience of transport.

Mindful of Cwyd's third information, Aillas called out: "Spirifume, we thank you for your bounty!" ... Aillas blinked. Something had happened. What? A twinkling of a hundred colours across the sunlight? A whisper of a hundred soft chords? He looked at Tatzel. "Did you notice anything?"

"A crow flew past."

“No colours? No sound?”

“None.”

Once more they set off, and entered a forest. Noticing a clump of morels growing soft and graceful in the shade, Aillas pulled up his horse and dismounted. He signalled to Tatzel.

“Come. You no longer have the excuse of a tender leg. Help me gather mushrooms.”

Tatzel wordlessly joined him, and for a space they picked mushrooms: morels, delicate shaggy-manes, golden chanterelles, pepper-tops, savory young field mushrooms.

Again Aillas acknowledged Spirifume's bounty, and the two rode onward.

With the sun still two hours high they arrived at the edge of the brake, with a steep and difficult descent below. Lake Quyvem now dominated the landscape to the north. A dozen forested islets rose from the surface and on two of these the ruins of two ancient castles faced each other across a mile of water. The air between them seemed to quiver with the memory of a thousand adventures: griefs and delights, romantic yearnings and dreadful deeds, treacheries by night and gallantries by day.



Aillas found within himself no inclination to scramble down yet another slope on this day. Cwyd had recommended the third brake for an overnight camp, and the advice seemed good. Aillas turned away from the edge and rode to a little meadow where a stream trickled from the forest; here he decided to camp.

Dismounting, he dug a shallow trench in which he built a fire of dry oak. To the side he arranged the meat on a spit, where it might roast and drip into the pannikin, with Tatzel turning the spit as needful. The drippings in the pannikin would later be used to fry the mushrooms, which Tatzel also had been

ordered to clean and cut. Glumly accepting reality, she set to work.

Aillas staked out the horses, set up the tent and gathered grass for a bed, then, returning to the fire, sat with his back to a laurel tree with the wine-sack ready to hand.

Tatzel knelt beside the fire, her black locks tied back with a ribbon. Thinking back to his time at Castle Sank, Aillas tried to remember his first sight of Tatzel: then a slender creature of thoughtless assurance walking with long swaggering strides by reason of natural verve.

Aillas sighed. Upon a heartsick young man, Tatzel, with her fascinating face and jaunty vitality, had made a deep impression.

And now? He watched her as she worked. Her assurance had been replaced by sullen unhappiness, and the bitter facts of her present existence had taken the luster from her verve.

Tatzel felt the pressure of his attention and turned a quick glance over her shoulder. "Why do you look at me so?"

"An idle whim."

Tatzel looked back to the fire.

“Sometimes I suspect you of madness.”

” ‘Madness’?” Aillas considered the word. “How so?”

“There would seem no other reason for your hatred of me.”

Aillas laughed. “I feel no such hatred.” He drank from the wine-sack. “Tonight I am kindly disposed; in fact, I see that I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“That debt is easily paid. You may give me a horse and let me go my way.”

“In this wild country? I would be doing you no favor. My gratitude, moreover, is

indirect. You have earned it despite yourself.”

Tatzel muttered: “Again the madness comes on you.”

Aillas raised the wine-sack and drank. He offered the sack to Tatzel, who disdainfully shook her head. Aillas drank again from a sack now sadly flabby. “My remarks are probably somewhat opaque. I will explain. At Castle Sank I became enamored of a certain Tatzel, who in some respects resembled you, but who was essentially an imaginary creature. This phantom which lived in my mind possessed qualities which I thought must be innate

to a creature of such grace and intelligence.

“Ah well, I escaped from Sank and went my way, encumbered still with this phantom, which now only served to distort my perceptions. At last I returned to South Ulfland.

“Almost by chance my most farfetched daydreams were realized, and I was able to capture you: the real Tatzel. So then-what of the phantom?” Aillas paused to drink, tilting the wine-sack high. “This impossibly delightful creature is gone, and now is even hard to remember. Tatzel exists, of course, and she has freed me from the tyranny of my

imagination, and here is the source of my gratitude.”

Tatzel, after a single brief sideglance, turned back to the fire. She rearranged the spit, where the roasting pork exhaled a splendid odor. She prepared batter for griddlecakes, then started the mushrooms to fry in the drippings from the roasting pork, while Aillas went to gather a salad of watercress from the stream.

In due course the pork was done to a turn; the two dined on the best the land could afford. “Spirifume!” called Aillas. “Be assured that we take great pleasure in your bounty, and we thank you for your hospitality! I drink to your

continued health!”

Spirifume gave back neither flux of colour nor whisper of sound, but when Aillas went to lift the wine-sack, which had arrived at a state of discouraging flatness, he found that it bulged to its fullest capacity. Aillas tasted the wine; it was soft and sweet and tart and fresh, at one and the same time. He cried out: “Spirifume! You are a god after my own heart! Should you ever tire of North Ulfland, please establish yourself in Troicinet!”

The sun still illuminated the panorama. Tatzel came to sit under the tree and idly picking little blue daisies, strung them



into a chain. Suddenly she spoke. "I have been thinking of what you told me. ... I feel a whole torrent of emotions! Because you brooded over your daydreams, I all unwittingly must suffer! Discomforts, dangers, indignities-I have known them all! Even though at Sank I spoke never a word to you-"

"Ah, but you did! After a trifle of sword-play with your brother! And do you not recall stopping in the gallery to talk with me?"

Tatzel looked blank. "Was that you? ... I barely noticed. Still, no matter how closely I resembled your illusion, the realities remain."

“And what are they?”

“I am Ska; you are Otherling. Even in dreams, your ideas are unthinkable.”

“Apparently so.” Aillas looked back across his memories. “Had I known you better at Castle Sank, I might never have troubled to capture you. The joke is on both of us. But again, no matter. You are you and I am I. The phantom is gone.”

Tatzel took up the wine-sack and drank. Then, rising to her knees, and sitting back on her heels, she swung around to face squarely upon Aillas, displaying for almost the first time the animation of the old Tatzel. She spoke with fervour:

“You are so wonderfully wrongheaded I can almost find it within myself to laugh at you! After chasing me over the moors, breaking my leg and causing me a dozen humiliations, you expect me to come creeping to you with adoration in my eyes, happy to be your slave, soliciting your caress, hoping with all my heart that I may compare favorably with your erotic daydream. You profess to find the Ska lacking in pathos, but your conduct toward me is absolutely self-serving! And now you sulk because I do not come sobbing to you and begging for your indulgence. Is it not a farce?”

Aillas heaved a deep sigh. “Everything you say is true. In all justice, I must

admit as much. I have been driven by romantic passion to act out a dream. I will say this, with only glancing reference to the fact that the Ska made me their slave and that I am entitled to retaliation: you are a prisoner of war. Had the Ska not taken our town Suarach, we would not have attacked Castle Sank. If you had submitted at once to capture, you would not have broken your leg, nor been exposed to humiliation, nor isolated here on the moors with me.”

“Bah! In my place, would you have done other than try to escape?”

“No. In my place, would you have done other than try to capture me?”

Tatzel looked at him for a full five seconds. “No... . Still, prisoner of war or slave or whatever, I am Ska and you are Otherling, and that is the way of it.”

### III

IN THE MORNING, while packing the wine-sack, Aillas found it bulging full as if it had never been broached, and he gave a most fervent thanks to the genial god Spirifume for what would seem an incalculable treasure. After ordering the campsite with meticulous care, out of respect for their host, Aillas and Tatzel set off down the slope. There was an easier quality to their relationship, as if

the air had been cleared, though camaraderie was still lacking.

The slope was steep, the brambles and thickets troublesome, but in due course they came down upon the fourth brake: the narrowest and most heavily forested of all the brakes, and in some areas less than half a mile in width. Tall trees: maple, chestnut, ash, oak, held high green umbrellas of foliage to shroud the brake in sun-flecked shadow.

Cwyd had ignored the fourth brake in his informations; Aillas, therefore, had no reason to dread some imminent danger. Still, an odd and troubling odor hung in the air, of a sort Aillas found both

mystifying and, at a primordial level, frightening, the more so since he could not identify it.

Tatzel looked about with a puzzled expression, glanced at Aillas; then, observing his own perplexity, she said nothing.

The horses, taking note of the odor, jerked their heads and sidled stiff-legged, adding to Aillas' uneasiness. He pulled up and searched the forest aisles in all directions, but found only shaded ground, carpeted with dead leaves and dappled with morning sunlight.

Aillas bestirred himself; nothing could

be gained by delay. He shook the reins and once more the party set off across the brake.

They rode through an uncanny quiet. Aillas watched warily to right and left, and twisted in the saddle to look back the way they had come. He saw nothing. Tatzel, absorbed in her own thoughts, rode with her gaze directed between the ears of her horse, at a point in the middle distance, and ignored Aillas' tension.

For ten minutes they rode through the silence; sunlight, filtering through foliage, working odd tricks on the vision. Suddenly a remarkable illusion appeared to Aillas so that he sucked in



his breath, blinked and stared with bulging eyes... . Illusion? No illusion whatever! Two great creatures fifteen feet tall watched placidly from a distance of barely thirty yards. They stood on squat yellow legs, of human conformation. The torsos and arms might have been those of monstrous gray-yellow bears. Stiff yellow bristles surrounded the round heads, producing an effect much like enormous yellow sat in pincushions, with no discernible facial features. Here, clearly, was the source of the stench.

The creatures stood motionless, their bristling great heads turned-toward Aillas and Tatzel? Hairs prickled at the

back of Aillas' neck; these were not ogres or giants, or anything else of this world, nor would they seem to be demons. They were things beyond both knowledge and hearsay, and they would haunt his memory for a very long time. Tatzel, riding ahead, observed not the silent creatures, nor did she hear Aillas' startled gasp.

The creatures passed from sight; Aillas kicked his heels into the flanks of his horse and took his troop loping through the forest; the horses needed no urging.

A few moments later they arrived at the edge of the brake and there discovered a trail which led them by an easy route

down to the fifth brake, across and down the final slope to the shores of Lake Quyvem. Here the trail met the shoreside road and once more they had returned to the society of men.

Along the eastern shore grew a thick pine forest; to the west were coves and rocky headlands. Two hundred yards ahead appeared a huddle of timber structures, including a hospice, or an inn.

As Aillas and Tatzel rode along the road they came upon a boatwright's workshop at the water's edge and, nearby, a dock to which were moored half a dozen small boats.

Out on the lake, a skiff approached the dock, sculled by a tall thin man with a long pallid face and lank black hair hanging to his shoulders. He brought the skiff close to the dock, made fast the painter, lifted out a basket of fish and stepped ashore. Here he paused to survey Aillas, Tatzel and their four horses with a slow and measured gaze.

The fisherman brought his catch to the road where he set down the basket and addressed Aillas in a deep voice: “Travellers, whence have you come and where do you go?”

Aillas replied: “We have come a goodly distance, over the moors from South

Ulfland. Our destination will be decreed by Tshansin, Goddess of Beginnings and Endings, who walks on wheels.”

The fisherman showed a smile of mildly amused contempt. “That is pagan superstition. I am not by nature a proselyter, but, truly, a unified wisdom rules the Tricosem, seeping from the roots of the Foundation Oak Kahauok, to form the stars in the sky.”

“That is the belief of the druids,” said Aillas. “It would seem that your own thinking is based on Druid doctrine.”

“There is a single Truth.”

“Perhaps someday I will look more deeply into the matter,” said Aillas. “At the moment I am interested in yonder inn, if such it be.”

“The house you see is Kernuun’s Antler, and I am Dildahl, keeper of the house, which I maintain for the Arch-druids on their peregrinations out to the sacred places. Still, if wayfarers are prepared to pay my charges, I will extend them very comfortable facilities.”

“What might be the order of these charges? Are they dear or modest? It is well to know such things in advance.”

“All in all, my charges are fair. They

vary from item to item, as might be expected. Lodging for the two of you in a private chamber equipped with pallets of clean straw and ewers of fresh water, I value at two copper pennies. A supper of lentils and bread, with a breakfast of porridge will cost another penny. Other dishes command higher prices. I serve excellent quail, four to the spit, for two copper pennies. A generous cut off a haunch of venison, with barley, currants, apples and nuts, is valued similarly. Fish is sold according to the season and the supply.”

“I have heard that certain of your charges are exorbitant,” said Aillas.  
“Still, these quotations are not

unreasonable.”

“In this regard you must make your own assessment. In the past I have been victimized by swindlers and impoverished guttricks, so I have learned to protect myself from indigence.” Dildahl lifted his basket of fish. “Will I expect you then at the Antler?”

“I must consider the contents of my wallet,” said Aillas. “I am not by any means a wealthy Arch-druid, to whom a handful of coppers as like an equal number of acorns.”

Dildahl appraised the horses. “Still, you



ride sound and valuable steeds.”

“Ah, but these horses are all of value that I own.”

Dildahl shrugged and departed.

## IV

BY THE TIME AILLAS COMPLETED HIS TRANSACTIONS along the lakeshore the time was late afternoon. All wind had left the sky; the lake lay flat as a mirror, with each of the islands reflected in duplicate below.

After considering sky, lake and landscape, Aillas told Tatzel: “It seems

that we must entrust ourselves to the mercies of the voracious Dildahl, Restraint may be necessary, since I carry no large store of coins on my person. What of you?"

"I have nothing."

"With ordinary caution, we should fare well enough, even though there is something about Dildahl which arouses my distrust."

The two presented themselves to the common room of Kernuun's Antler, where Dildahl, now attired in a white apron and a white cap which to some extent confined his long black locks,

seemed gratified to see them. “For a time I thought that you had decided to proceed on your way.”

“We transacted a trifle of business, and then remembered the comforts of the Antler. Hence, you see us now.”

“So be it! I can offer a suite of rooms customarily occupied by the most august of the druids, complete with baths of warm water and soap of olive oil, should you feel inclined to a measure of luxury-”

“Still at a cost of two copper pennies? If so-”

“There is a substantial difference in the rate,” said Dildahl.

Aillas felt in his wallet and rattled the few coins which he found there. “We must moderate our desires to our means. I would not wish to lodge and dine like a priest and then find myself embarrassed when it came time to pay the tally.”

Dildahl said: “In this regard, I usually insist that unreferenced guests post a declaration of surety with me, just precisely to avoid any awkward dilemmas. Please sign this paper.” So saying, Dildahl tendered a sheet of good parchment inscribed in a fine hand with the notification:

Be It Hereby Known That I, the undersigned, now propose to take food and lodging for myself and my entourage at this inn known as Kernuun's Antler, of which the Honourable Dildahl is the landlord. I agree to pay the proper and designated charges for chamberage, and also for such, food and drink as may be consumed by me and my entourage. As surety for the payment of these charges, I offer those horses now in my possession, together with their saddles, bridles, and other furniture. If I do not pay the charges stipulated on the account rendered by Dildahl said horses and adjuncts become the property of Dildahl in fee whole and simple.

Aillas frowned. “This declaration has a somewhat menacing tone.”

“It could alarm only a person who planned to avoid payment of his debt. Are you this sort of person? If so, I have no interest in placing before you the goods of my kitchen and the comforts of my rooms.”

“That is fairly said,” remarked Aillas. “However, I could not sleep well unless I added a small proviso. Give me your pen.”

“What do you intend to write?” demanded Dildahl in suspicion.

“You shall see.” Aillas inscribed an addendum:

This document should not be held to encompass the clothes worn by Aillas and his companion, nor their weapons, personal effects, ornaments, wine-sacks, keepsakes or other possessions. Aillas of Trotcinet

Dildahl scrutinized the addendum, shrugged, and placed the parchment under the counter. “Come; I will show you to your chamber.”

Dildahl took them to a pair of large pleasant rooms with windows overlooking the lake, and a separate

bathroom. Aillas asked: “For these rooms the charge is two pennies?”

“Of course not!” declared Dildahl in astonishment. “I understood that you wished to test the luxury of the Antler!”

“Only at a price of two pennies.”

Dildahl scowled. “The cheap chamber is dank, and furthermore is not ready.”

“Dildahl, if you wish to hold me to payment of my account, then I must hold you to the charges quoted by you.”

“Bah!” muttered Dildahl, drooping his loose lower lip to show a purple maw.



“For my own convenience, you may occupy these rooms for three pennies.”

“Please render that quotation in writing, here and now, to avoid later misunderstanding.” Then, as he watched Dildahl writing: “No, no! Not three pennies apiece! Three pennies in total!”

“You are a troublesome guest,” muttered Dildahl. “There is little profit in serving such as you.”

“A man can spend only what he can afford! If he overreaches, he loses his horses!”

Dildahl only grunted. “When will you

dine?”

“As soon as we freshen ourselves in this convenient bath.”

“For such a price, I include no hot water.”

“Ah well! Since we have incurred your displeasure, cold water must be our lot!”

Dildahl turned away. “It is only your petty frugality which I find reprehensible.”

“I hope you will instruct us in the ways of open-handed bounty when we take our supper.”

“We shall see,” said Dildahl.

At supper the two sat alone in the common room except for a pair of brown-cloaked druids bending low over their food in a corner of the room. They finished their meal and came to the counter to pay the score. Aillas strolled across the room and stood by as each laid down a copper penny and departed.

Dildahl was somewhat annoyed by Aillas' proximity to the transaction.

“Well then? What will you eat?”

“What is on your board tonight?”

“The lentil soup is burned, and is off.”

“The druids appeared to be eating fine brown trout. You may fry us a pair of these, with a salad of cress and garden stuff. What were the druids eating in their side dish?”

“That was my specialty: crayfish tails with eggs and mustard.”

“You may also serve us such a side dish, with some good bread and butter, and perhaps a fruit conserve.”

Dildahl bowed. “At your order. Will you drink wine?”

“You may bring us a flask of whatever wine you deem a good value for the

price, but at all times, please keep our parsimony in mind. We are as niggardly as druids.”

Aillas and Tatzel were served a dinner with which they could find no fault and Dildahl seemed almost civil. Tatzel eyed him with foreboding. “He seems to be making a large number of marks on his board.”

“He can mark until doomsday for all of me. If he becomes insolent, you need only announce that you are Lady Tatzel of Castle Sank, and instantly he will moderate his manner. I know his kind.”

“I thought that I was now Tatzel the

slave-girl.”

Aillas chuckled. “True! Your protests might not carry weight, after all.”

The two retired and went to their couches; the night passed without incident.

In the morning they ate a breakfast of porridge, bacon and eggs. Aillas then, counting on his fingers, arrived at what he considered a fair reckoning for the hospitality provided by Dildahl: a sum of ten copper pennies, or a silver half-florin.

Aillas went to the counter to pay the

score; here Dildahl, rubbing his hands briskly together, presented him a statement of charges, the grand total of which was three silver florins and fourpence.

Aillas laughed and tossed back the statement. "I do not even intend to argue with you. Here is a silver half-florin, with an extra two pennies because the mustard was good. I now offer you this sum in payment; will you accept it?"

"Certainly not!" declared Dildahl, his face flushing red and his lax lower lip drooping.

"Then I will take the money back, and

we will bid you good-day.”

“Do you think to alarm me?” roared Dildahl. “I have your pledge at this moment next to my very hand! You have refused to pay my charges; therefore I claim ownership of your horses.”

Aillas and Tatzel turned away from the counter. “Claim all you like,” said Aillas. “I own no horses. Yesterday, before our arrival, I traded them for a boat. Dildahl, farewell!”

**V**

THE BOAT WAS A CLINKER-PLANK SKIFF fifteen feet long with copper-



riveted seams, a sprit-sail, lee-boards and a rudder swung off the transom in the new manner.

Aillas rowed the skiff out into the lake, raised the sail to a morning breeze from the west and the boat scudded northward down the lake with the wake gurgling behind.

Tatzel made herself comfortable in the bow, and Aillas thought that she seemed to be enjoying the freshness of the morning. Presently she looked over her shoulder: "Now where are you bound?"

"As before, to Dun Cruighre in Godelia."

“Is that close to Xounges?”

“Xounges is immediately across the Skyre.”

Tatzel said no more. Aillas wondered as to her interest but forebore to ask.

For two days they sailed the lake, passing the twelve Druid islets, and discovering on one a giant crow built of wicker-work, which provoked Tatzels wonder. Aillas told her: “In the fall, on the eve of the day they call ‘Suaurghille’, they will set the crow afire and conduct a great orgy below. Inside the crow will burn two dozen of their enemies. If we set foot on the

island we would burn with the others. Sometimes it will be a horse, or a man, or a bear, or a bull.”

At its northern end the lake became shallow and choked with reeds, but at length spilled out to become the headwaters of the River Solander. Three days later Aillas looked ahead to see the bluffs which flanked the Solander Estuary. On the right was the Kingdom of Dahaut; on the left, North Ulfland still.

The estuary opened into the Skyre, and the skiff rode over larger waves than it might have liked, and far larger than Tatzel found comfortable, while the

scent of salt water hung in the air. With the wind blowing brisk from the west, the skiff plunged ahead at four or five knots, throwing back cold spray, to add to Tatzel's discomfort.

Ahead, on the left, at the end of a stony peninsula, rose the fortified town Xounges; on the right now was Godelia, the land of the Celts, and at last Dun Cruighre came into view.

Aillas looked along the docks and to his delight discovered not only a large Troice cargo cog, but also one of his new warships.

Aillas sailed the skiff up to the side the

warship. The sailors on deck looked curiously down. One called: “Ahoy there, fellow! Stand clear! What do you think you are up to?”

Aillas called up: “Drop me a ladder and call the captain.”

A ladder was lowered; Aillas made fast the skiff, steadied the ladder while Tatzel climbed to the deck, then he too followed. By this time the captain had appeared. Aillas took him aside. “Sir, do you recognize me?”

The captain looked hard, and his eyes widened. “Your Majesty! What do you here in this condition?”

“It is a long story which I will tell you presently. For now, know me merely as ‘Aillas’, no more. I am, so to speak, incognito.”

“Just as you say, sir.”

“The lady is Ska and under my protection. See if you can find her a place of privacy; let her bathe and give her clean clothes; she has been sick for three days now and would as soon die as live.”

“At once, sir! And you will be wanting something of the same, I take it?”

“If it is not too inconvenient for you, I

would welcome a bath and a change of clothes.”

“My convenience, sir, is not to be considered. Our facilities are not luxurious, but they are yours to command.”

“Thank you, but first: what is the news from South Ulfiand?”

“I can only give a third-hand report, but it is said that a Ska army from Suarach was caught in the open country by one of our armies. There was a great battle of a sort which will long be remembered. The Ska were sorely beset, and then another of our armies marching down

from the east struck them from the rear and they were destroyed. I am told that Suarach is once more an Ulf city.”

“And all this occurred during my absence,” said Aillas.

“It appears that I am not as indispensable as I would like to think.”

“As to that, sir, I cannot say. We have been sailing the Narrow Sea, interdicting the Ska, and we have caused them great trouble. We are here now only to take on supplies. In fact, we were close upon casting off when you came aboard.”



“What of King Gax across the way in Xounges? Is he still alive?”

“It is said that he is finally dying and a Ska puppet will be the next king; that is the news which has come to us.”

“Hold off your departure, if you will, and also show me where I can clean myself.”

Half an hour later, Aillas encountered Tatzel in the captain's cabin. She had discarded her old garments, bathed and now wore a gown of dark maroon linen which one of the seamen had been sent ashore to buy in the market. She came slowly close to Aillas and put her hands

on his shoulders. “Aillas, take me, if you please, to Xounges and put me ashore on the dock! My father is now there on a special mission. I want nothing so much as to join him.” Tatzel searched Aillas’ face. “You are not truly an unkind man! I implore you, let me go free! I can offer you nothing but my body which you seem not to want, but you may have me now, and gladly, if you will deliver me to Xounges! Or if you want none of me, my father will reward you!”

“Indeed!” said Aillas. “How?”

“First, he will remit your slavery forever; you need never fear recapture! He will give you gold, enough that you

may take up a piece of land in Troicinet, and never know want.”

Aillas, looking into the mournful face, could not resist a laugh. “Tatzel, you are most persuasive. We shall go to Xounges.”

# Chapter 13

## I

WHILE AILLAS with his unsatisfactory slave Tatzel traversed the wilds of North Ulfland, events elsewhere about the Elder Isles were not therefore held in abeyance.

At Lyonesse Town, Queen Sollace and her spiritual adviser Father Umphred inspected drawings for the prospective cathedral which they hoped might rear a magnificent facade above the end of the Chale and bring an ecstasy of religious awe upon all who saw it.

Queen Sollace, should the cathedral be built, had been assured of sanctification and eternal bliss by Father Umphred, whose own rewards would be somewhat more modest: the Archbishopric of the Lyonesse Diocese.

In view of King Casmir's obdurate resistance, Queen Sollace had become less confident in her hopes. Father Umphred, time and time again, reassured her: "Dear lady, dear lady! Never allow the shades of despair to mar the regal beauty of your cheeks! Discouragement? Expel the word: down, down, down! Into the odious quagmire of guilt, heresy and vice where wallow the benighted folk of this world!"

Sollace sighed. "Your words are good to hear, but virtue alone, even when joined with a thousand prayers and tears of holy passion, will not melt the soul of Casmir."

"Not so, dear lady! I have words to whisper in the ear of King Casmir which might mean two or even four cathedrals! But they must be whispered at the proper moment!"

Father Umphred's encouragement was nothing new; he had hinted in this manner on other occasions, and Queen Sollace had learned to control her curiosity with a sniff and a toss of the head.

As for King Casmir, he wanted no dilution of his authority. His subjects espoused a great variety of beliefs: Zoroastrianism, a whiff or two of Christianity, Pantheism, Draidical doctrine, a few fragments of classic Roman theology, somewhat more of the Gothic system, all on a substratum of ancient animism and Pelasgian Mysteries. Such a melange of religions suited King Casmir well; he wanted nothing to do with an orthodoxy deriving from Rome, and Sollace's talk of a cathedral had become a vexation.

At Falu Ffall in Avallon, King Audry sat with his feet in a basin of warm soapy water, in preparation for the royal

pedicure, meanwhile listening to despatches from sources near and far, as read by Malrador, the underchamberlain entrusted with this thankless task.

King Audry was especially distressed by the news from Sir Lavrilan dal Ponzo, who, at King Audry's orders and using tactics suggested by two of Audry's intimates, Sir Arthemus and Sir Gligory, had conducted a grand sortie into Wysrod, where he had been repulsed by the Celts.

Sir Lavrilan earnestly requested reinforcements, and cited the need for light cavalry and archers; the pikemen and young knights recommended by



Arthemus and Gligory had fared poorly against the boisterous Celts.

King Audry sat back into the cushions of his chair, and threw his hands high in disgust. “What went wrong this time? I am baffled by these ineptitudes! No, Malrador, I will hear no more! Already you have soured my day with your croaking; sometimes I suspect that you enjoy making me miserable!”

“Your Majesty!” cried Malrador. “How can you think that of me? I do my duty, no more! And, respectfully, I urge that you hear this last despatch; it came in only an hour ago from the marches. It seems that notable events are afoot in the

Ulfands, regarding which your Majesty must be apprised.”

King Audry surveyed Malrador through half-closed eyelids, his head thrown back into the cushions. “Often I toy with the notion of requiring you not only to read the despatches, but also to answer them, thus sparing me the vexation.”

At this humourous sally, Sir Arthemus and Sir Gligory, sitting nearby, gave appreciative chuckles.

Malrador bowed. “Sire, I would never dare to so presume. This then is the news from Sir Samfire of the marches.” Malrador went on to read the despatch,

which told of Troice and Ulfish successes against the Ska. Sir Samfire went on to make recommendations, using language which aroused King Audry to forget the situation and stamp his feet. Two maidens and the barber came running to remove the basin and prop Audry's feet on a cushioned stool, so that the pedicure might proceed. The barber said politely: "Sire, I suggest that you hold your feet motionless while I am cutting your toenails."

Audry muttered: "Yes, yes. ... I am astonished by Samfire's language! Does he think to dictate my strategies?"

Arthemus and Gligory clicked their

tongues and made sounds of perturbation. Malrador incautiously said: “Your Majesty, I believe that Samfire merely attempts to put the significance of the events into clear perspective, for your maximum information.”

“Ta-ta-ta, Malrador! Now you take his part against me! These are distant events, beyond the marches, and all the while we are mocked by these infuriating Celts! They lack all awe of great Dahaut! Bah! They must be punished. I will drown them in their own blood, since that seems to be their choice. Arthemus? Gligory? Why are we so bedevilled? Answer me that! By

boors and lumpkins smelling of cow!  
What is the explanation?”

Arthemus and Gligory made indignant gestures and pulled at their mustaches. King Audry turned bitterly back to Malrador. “Well then, you have had your way; now are you done? Always you bring me worries when I am least in the mood to deal with them!”

“Sire, it is my task to read the dispatches. If I concealed unfavorable news from you, then indeed you would have cause to reprimand me.”

King Audry heaved a sigh. “That is true enough. Malrador, you are a faithful

fellow! Go, and write these words on parchment: ‘Sir Lavrilan dal Ponzo: we extend our best regards! It is time that you wiped the butter from your chin and, perhaps by example, inculcated your troops with a mood of full pugnacity! Only last month you assured me that we would break the heads of a thousand Celtic fools; what fol-de-rol will you tell me next?’ Then affix my seal, subscribe my signature and send off this despatch by fast courier.”

“Very good, sire. It shall be done, and your reprimand shall be effected.”

“It is more than a mere reprimand, Malrador! It is an order! I want to see

Celtic heads grinning from the ends of our pikes; I want the might of Dahaut to send these buffoons flying and hopping like frightened rabbits!”

Malrador said gravely: “Sir Arthemus and Sir Gligory command crack brigades; why restrain their fire? They are both spoiling for a good fight!”

Arthemus and Gligory slapped their hands as if in enthusiasm. “Well said, Malrador! Go now and stir up Sir Lavrilan while we discuss affairs with his Highness!”

As soon as Malrador had departed, Arthemus and Gligory soothingly

explained away the latest debacle in Wysrod, and turned the conversation to more pleasant subjects, and the three immersed themselves in plans for the entertainment of King Adolphe of Aquitaine, and so went affairs in Dahaut.

In other parts of the Elder Isles, Torqual, by sheer force of will resurrected himself from the edge of death. In her villa on the beach near Ys, Melancthe thought unfathomable thoughts. At Swer Smod and Trilda respectively, Murgan and Shimrod kept to their manses, and occupied themselves with their researches. Tamurello, however, was absent from Faroli, and according to the magician Raught Raven, had taken



himself to the peak of a high mountain in Ethiopia, for a period of meditation.

And the Green Pearl? A pair of young goblins, coming upon Manting's naked white skeleton, played games with the bones: kicking the skull back and forth, wearing the pelvis as a helmet, and throwing the vertebrae at a party of dryads, who quickly climbed into the trees and taunted the goblins in sweet high voices.

Forest mold covered the pearl ever deeper. So passed the summer and autumn and winter. With the coming of spring, seeds began to germinate in that area close upon the buried pearl. Young

plants sent up shoots, which grew with unusual vigor, sending out a profusion of lush leaves followed by wonderful flowers, each different from the rest and like no other flower ever seen before.

## II

XOUNGES HAD BEEN A FORTIFIED PLACE since before the beginning of history. The town occupied a flat-topped knob of stone bounded on three sides by cliffs rising a sheer two hundred feet from the water. On the fourth side a narrow saddle of granite something over a hundred yards long connected the town with the mainland.

The Ulfland of four centuries ago had been a powerful kingdom, comprising both North and South Ulfland (though not Ys or the Vale of Evander), Godelia and what were now the Marches of Dahaut, out past Poelitetz. At this time King Fidwig, in the full exercise of his megalomaniac might, decreed the total security of Xounges. Ten thousand men toiled twenty years, to achieve a system of fortifications based on walls of granite forty feet wide at the base and a hundred and twenty feet high, closing the causeway at its narrowest width, again where the causeway entered the town, then hooking out into the Skyre to protect the harbor from attack by sea.

Almost as an afterthought, King Fidwig ordained a palace, and Jehaundel was built to a scale as prodigious as the walls of Xounges.

Much reduced from its old magnificence, Xounges remained as secure against attack as ever. The aristocracy had maintained tall stone townhouses; and formed the nucleus of the small army which defended the city from the Ska.

Jehaundel, now the palace of King Gax, showed a massive facade to the market square, but, like the palaces of the lesser nobility, made no pretense of ancient glory. The wings were closed off, as were the upper floors save for the suite

used by King Gax: a dreary set-of chambers carpeted with woven rushes and furnished with massive pieces scarred by the hard usage of centuries. Fuel was an item of expense; the bedroom where King Gax lay dying was warmed only minimally by a mean little smolder of turves.

In his prime Gax had been a man of noteworthy stature and strong physique. For thirty years, while the Ska advanced their black battalions, first into the Foreshore, then across North Ulfland, his rule had gone badly. He had fought hard and suffered wounds, but the Ska were relentless. They destroyed his forces and crushed three proud Daut

armies fighting under a treaty of mutual assistance. At last the Ska drove Gax to bay, behind the walls of Xounges. Stalemate came into being. The Ska were powerless to strike at him; and he could exert even less pressure against the Ska.

From time to time Ska emissaries brought Gax lukewarm offers of amnesty, if he would open the gates of Xounges and abdicate in favor of the Ska designate. Gax rejected all such overtures, in the wistful hope that King Audry might once again honour the ancient pact and send a great army to drive the Ska into the sea.

In this policy he was generally supported by his subjects, who saw no advantage for themselves under Ska rule. Sir Kreim, next of the royal succession, also endorsed Gax's intransigence, if for reasons quite at variance with Gax's own. Sir Kreim was a burly heavy-faced man of middle maturity, with black hair, lowering black brows and a short curling black beard in stark contrast to the pallor of his complexion. His appetites were large; his tastes were coarse; his ambitions were unbridled. When he himself assumed the throne, he hoped to use the office for his best personal advantage, either through alliance with the Ska, or abdication at a

price which would afford him a luxurious estate in Dahaut.

Time passed and King Gax was unconscionably slow about his dying. If rumor were to be believed, Sir Kreim contained his impatience only by dint of great effort and perhaps had even considered methods to hasten the natural processes.

The chamberlain Rohan, upon learning that Sir Kreim had shown great favor to a pair of the guards outside King Gax's bedchamber, ordered new dead-bolts affixed to the doors and reassigned the guards to permanent night duty on the outer parapets, where rain and storm



were merely signals for augmented vigilance. Rohan also devised a system which guaranteed that King Gax's food was the most wholesome in all Xounges; each of the kitchen cooks was required to eat of Gax's food before it was served.

Sir Kreim, taking note of the precautions, congratulated Rohan for his fidelity and grimly set himself to wait for King Gax to die at his own pace.

Meanwhile, the stalemate persisted. King Audry not only failed to succor his ally King Gax; the Ska insolently drove into Dahaut and occupied the fort Poelitetz. In outrage King Audry issued a

series of ever more emphatic protests, then warnings, then threats. The Ska paid no heed, and King Audry finally turned his attention elsewhere. In due course he would assemble an invincible army, with a hundred carriages of war, a thousand knights in full regalia, and ten thousand valiant men-at-arms. In a magnificent glitter of sharp steel and silver crests, with banderoles streaming overhead, the great army would fall upon the Ska and send them reeling and skreeking into the sea; and Audry sent King Gax a document asserting his firm decision in this regard.

King Gax seldom stirred from his bed. He could sense the ebbing of his vitality,

and sometimes thought to feel the passing of hours and minutes as if they were grains of sand in an hour-glass. His face, once ruddy, was drawn and gray, but his eyes still burned with the smoky yellow gleam of intelligence. He lay motionless, propped up on a pillow, arms arranged on the coverlet, and spent long hours watching the flicker of fire on the hearth.

Occasionally, under Rohan's watchful eye, he conferred with his staff and received visitors, including a deputation of high-ranking Ska: the Dukes Luhalcx and Ankhalcx, and an entourage of lesser lords. While they spoke bluntly and to the point, they conducted themselves

with all propriety, and King Gax could find no fault with their general behavior.

During the Ska's first audience with King Gax, necessarily in his bedroom, Sir Kreim and two others were also in attendance. Duke Luhalcx stated the deputation's business: "Your Highness, we regret to find you unwell, but all men die, and it appears that your time is close upon you."

King Gax managed a weary smile. "While life remains, I live."

Duke Luhalcx bowed curtly in acknowledgment. "I intended the comment only as a step-board for the

burden of my message, which I now state. The Ska nation rules North Ulfland, and intends to restore the ancient glory. We will expand our power: first to the south, then to the east. The city Xounges is a nuisance to us: a stone in our path. We must guard its approaches lest the Dauts attempt a reinforcement, which would place an enemy force full on our flank and threaten our control of Poelitetz. We want both the city Xounges and the titular rule of North Ulfland, that we may rescind the treaty with Dahaut. With our flank secure, we are free to subjugate South Ulfland, where the new king is becoming obstreperous.”

“I am not interested in expediting your conquests. To the contrary.”

“Still, you die, and events will pass you by. There is no royal prince in the statutory line of succession-”

Here Sir Kreim indignantly thrust himself forward. “Absurd and incorrect! I am in the direct line of succession, and I shall be the next king of North Ulfland!”

Duke Luhalcx smiled. “We understand your ambitions very well, since you have communicated them to us on several occasions already. We intend to buy neither Xounges nor the title from

you.” He turned back to King Gax, who had watched the interchange with a wintry smile. “Your Highness, we request that you immediately anoint our designate as the king of North Ulfland.”

Sir Kreim cried out: “Your Majesty, the insolence of this proposal is exceeded only by its coldblooded arrogance! We obviously reject it with indignation!”

Duke Luhalcx paid him no heed. “We will thereupon grant you and all present inhabitants of this place amnesty for acts committed to our detriment and we will confiscate neither wealth nor property. Will you agree to this proposal?”

“Certainly not!” declared Sir Kreim.

Gax spoke in irritation: “Sir Kreim, please allow me to formulate my own responses.” He turned back to Duke Luhalcx. “We have survived the displeasure of the Ska for many years. Why should we not continue to do so?”

“You can assure this policy only while you live. Upon your death, Sir Kreim, should he become king, will attempt to extort treasure from us. Our easiest recourse is to pay, then recover this treasure by a levy upon all the folk of Xounges. I assure you that not one groat of Sir Kreim’s fee will come from our own coffers.”



“There would be no negotiations!”  
snapped Sir Kreim. “On this I am firm!  
But if there were, you would be forced  
to stipulate financial as well as physical  
amnesty for our entire population!”

King Gax spoke sharply: “Sir Kreim, I  
have heard enough of your  
interpolations! You may leave the room  
at once!”

Sir Kreim bowed and departed.

King Gax asked: “Suppose the next king  
for a fact continued my policies: what  
then?”

“I do not care to reveal all the details of

our plans. Suffice it to say, we would feel that we must take Xounges by force.”

“If this is so simple, why have you not done so before?”

Duke Luhalcx considered a moment, then said: “I will tell you this: we do not regard Xounges as impregnable. If we decide upon siege, then you will know a total blockade and full deprivation. Rain will be your only drink, and grass your only meat. If we were to take Xounges by force, and if a single precious Ska life were lost, every man, woman and child in Xounges would know the shackles of slavery.”

King Gax made a flickering gesture of frail white fingers. “Go. I will consider my opportunities.”

Duke Luhalcx bowed and the deputation departed.

A week later the Ska returned. Sir Kreim was again present, on condition that he maintain full silence, unless his opinions were solicited.

Duke Luhalcx presented his compliments to King Gax, and asked: “Your Highness, in connection with our proposal, have you reached a decision?”

Gax gave a hacking cough. “You are

right in that my life is leaving me. I must choose my successor and soon, or I shall die with the deed undone.”

“Whereupon Sir Kreim becomes king?”

“True. Unless I anoint him, or someone else, such as good Rohan here, before I die.”

“The Ska preference, even over the excellent Rohan, is the Duke Ankhalcx. His nomination would ensure for Xounges the advantages of which I spoke.”

“I will keep your recommendation in mind.”

“When will you undertake the ceremony of coronation?”

“Soon. I have sent a courier to King Audry, asking his advice. A response should arrive before the week is out. Until then I will have nothing further to say.”

“But you have not ruled out our candidate Duke Ankhalcx?”

“I have come to no firm decision. If King Audry instantly mobilizes a great army and marches west, naturally I will not throw open the gates to you.”

“In any case, you will still wish to

nominate and anoint your successor?”

Gax reflected a moment. “Yes.”

“And when will this ceremony occur?”

Gax closed his eyes. “Seven days from today.”

“You will give me no prior indication of your intentions?”

Gax spoke with his eyes closed. “Much depends upon the news from Avallon. In truth, I expect very little, and I will die a bitter death.”

The Ska departed, tight-lipped and muttering among themselves.

### III

THE TROICE WARSHIP TIED UP TO A DOCK in the Xounges harbor. Aillas disembarked with Tatzel, the captain and two others from the ship's crew.

The group passed under a raised portcullis, through a tunnel thirty feet long and out upon a narrow cobbled street which wound up to the market square. The facade of Jehaundel loomed opposite: a set of ponderous stone blocks, devoid of grace or delicacy. The group crossed the square, entered Jehaundel by the front portal, which was

opened for them by a doorkeeper.

In an echoing stone foyer a footman came forward. “Sir, what is your business here?”

“I am a gentleman of South Ulfland and I request an audience with King Gax.”

“Sir, King Gax is ill, and sees few persons, especially if their business is casual or inconsequential.”

“My business is neither one nor the other.”

The footman brought the High Chancellor from his office, who asked:



“You are surely not another courier from Avallon?”

“No.” Aillas took the official aside. “I am here on a matter of urgency. You must take me directly to King Gax.”

“Ah, but that I am not allowed to do. What is your name and how is your business so urgent?”

“Mention my presence only to King Gax and in private.

Tell him that I am intimate with Sir Tristano of Troicinet, whom perhaps you yourself will remember.”

“I do indeed! What name, then, shall I announce?”

“King Gax will want my name spoken to himself alone.”

“Come this way, if you please.”

The High Chancellor led them into the main gallery and indicated benches along the wall. “Please be seated. When the king is able to see you, Rohan the chamberlain will so inform you.”

“Remember! Not a word to anyone but King Gax!”

Half an hour passed. Rohan the

chamberlain appeared: a stocky short-legged person of mature years, with a few wisps of gray hair and an expression of chronic suspicion. He inspected the group with automatic distrust. He spoke to Aillas, who had risen to meet him. “The king has taken favorable notice of your message. He now confers with the Ska, but will speak with you shortly.”

The conference in King Gax’s bedchamber was short indeed. Sir Kreim, already on hand, stared sullenly into the fire. As soon as Dukes Luhalcx and Ankhalcx entered, King Gax indicated a blond young gentleman dressed in the flamboyant style of the

court at Avallon.

“There is the Daut courier. Sir, read out King Audry’s message once again, if you please.”

The courier snapped open a scroll and read: ” ‘To the attention of Gax, King of North Ulfland: Royal cousin, I send you my dearest regards! In the matter of the Ska brigands, I counsel that you fall on them tooth and nail and defend your great city for yet another brief period, until I can mitigate one or two carking local problems. Then together we will destroy this black-hearted human plague once and for all! Be of good cheer, and know of my hopes for your continued

good health. I am the undersigned,  
Audry, King of Dahaut.””

King Gax said: “That is my message  
from Audry. It is as I expected; he  
intends to do nothing.”

Luhalcx, with a grim smile, nodded. “So  
then: what of my proposal?”

Unable to repress his fury, Sir Kreim  
called out: “I beg you, sir, make no  
commitments until we have conferred!”

Gax ignored him. To Luhalcx he said:  
“Put your proposal in the form of a  
written protocol, with your guarantees  
delineated in bold black ink. In three

days will be the coronation.”

“Of whom?”

“Bring me your solemn handwritten document.”

Luhalcx and Ankhalcx bowed and left, the chamber. They descended the stairs and turned down the great gallery. To the side sat a group of five persons. A young woman in their midst cried out in a poignant voice: “Father! Do not pass me by!”

Tatzel jumped to her feet and would have run across the gallery had not Aillas caught her around the waist and

pulled her back down upon the bench.  
“Girl, sit quiet and make no bother!”

Luhalcx stared incredulously from Tatzel to Aillas and back once more to Tatzel:  
“What are you doing here?”

Aillas spoke: “Address your remarks to me! The girl is my slave.”

Luhalcx’s jaw dropped in new bewilderment. “What idiocy is this? My man, you are mistaken! This is the Lady Tatzel, a Ska noblewoman; how can she be your slave?”

“By the usual process, which you of all people must know in every detail. In

short, I captured her and subdued her to my will.”

Duke Luhalcx slowly came forward, eyes glowing. “You cannot do such a deed to a noble Ska lady, and then dismiss it so casually in front of her very father!”

“It is no hardship whatever,” said Aillas. “You have never strained at the deed. Now the shoe is on the other foot, and suddenly you find the idea incredible. Do you not sense a taint of unreality?”

Duke Luhalcx showed a wolfish grin and put his hand to his sword. “I will kill



you dead; then the unreality, and reality itself, will disappear.”

“Father!” cried Tatzel. “Do not fight him! He is a very demon with the sword! He cut Torqual to pieces!”

“In any event, I will not fight you,” said Aillas. “I am in this palace under the protection of King Gax. His soldiers will come to my call and put you in a dungeon.”

Duke Luhalcx looked uncertainly from Aillas to a pair of armed pikemen who stood immobile nearby, watching the encounter with the cool gaze of lizards.

Rohan the chamberlain came into the hall, and approached Aillas. “His Highness will see you now.”

“He must see me as well,” declared Duke Luhalcx with sudden vehemence. “This is an intolerable case, which he must adjudicate!”

Rohan tried to argue that turmoil might excite King Gax, but his protests went unheeded. However, at the door to the bedchamber, he excluded all but Aillas, Tatzel and the Duke Luhalcx, who strode forward and addressed King Gax from close by his bed.

“Your Highness, I bring my complaint to

your attention. When I walked along your gallery I discovered this fellow and with him my daughter, whom he holds by force and claims as his slave! I bade him to relinquish her to me; as a Ska noblewoman she cannot be subjected to such indignities!”

King Gax asked huskily: “Did the enslavement occur here at Jehaundel, while she was under the protection of my roof?”

“No; the deed was done elsewhere.”

King Gax looked at Aillas. “Sir, what have you to say?”

“Your Highness, I plead natural law. Duke Luhalcx has enslaved many free folk both of South and North Ulfland, including, so it happens, myself. He does not remember me, but for a goodly period of my life he forced me to serve him as his servant at Castle Sank, where I became acquainted with Tatzel. I escaped from Sank; I became a free man, and then, when opportunity offered, I captured Tatzel and made her my slave.”

King Gax looked at Duke Luhalcx. “Do you have Ulfish slaves in your custody?”

“I do.” Luhalcx spoke with lame dignity, for already he saw how his case was going.

“Then how, in logic, can you protest this instance? Even though it must cause you pain.”

Duke Luhalcx bowed his head. “Your adjudication is fair and just; I stand reprimanded for my protests.” He turned to Aillas. “How much in gold will you take, that I may recover my daughter?”

Aillas said slowly: “I know of no gauge which measures the value of a human life. Luhalcx, take your daughter; she is useless to me. Tatzel, I give you into the care of your father. Now, if you please, you may depart, and allow me to consult with good King Gax.”

Duke Luhalcx gave a short nod. He took Tatzel's hand and the two departed the chamber. Remaining were Rohan and the two guards by the door.

Aillas turned to King Gax. "Sire, our business must be transacted in total secrecy."

Gax croaked: "Rohan, leave us together. Guards, stand outside the door."

With poor grace Rohan departed the chamber, and the guards moved into the hall. Aillas turned back to King Gax. "Sire, my name is Aillas."

Half an hour later Rohan became uneasy

and looked through the doorway. “Sir, are you well?”

“Quite well, Rohan. I need nothing; you may go.”

Rohan departed. Aillas asked: “Do you trust Rohan?”

King Gax uttered a wry chuckle. “It is generally felt that Kreim is to be the next king; profit and place go with him, and I am deemed, accurately enough, as good as dead.”

“Not quite,” said Aillas.

“Rohan devotes himself to my welfare

by night and by day. I count him among my few true friends.”

“In that case, let us include him in our discussions.”

“As you wish. Rohan!”

Rohan appeared with a promptitude which suggested an ear to the door.

“Sir?”

“We wish you to contribute your wisdom to our discussions.”

“Very well, sir.”

Aillas said: “The ceremony of coronation will take place three days



from now. Apparently your best hope is to surrender the city to the Ska along with the crown. Therefore Sir Kreim must act either tonight or tomorrow night, or his dreams will be forever shattered.”

Gax stared forlornly into the fire. “Were he king, could he not hold Xounges as I have done?”

“Perhaps, had he the will to do so. Still, Xounges is not so impregnable as you may think. Do sentries patrol the cliffs by night?”

“For what reason? What could they see but foam and black water?”

“If I were attacking Xounges, I would choose a dark calm night. A rope ladder would be lowered from somewhere along the cliffs, and warriors waiting below in small boats would climb this ladder, then lower more ladders and more warriors would climb the cliffs. In short order hundreds of men would have arrived to enter your city.”

King Gax nodded weakly. “No doubt you are right.”

“As another case, how is your harbour guarded?”

“At sunset two heavy chains close off the entrance; no ship, large or small, can

enter. Then the portcullis is lowered.”

“Chains will not hold back swimmers. On a dark night a thousand men could ease into the harbour, towing their weapons on floats, then hide aboard ships already at the docks until morning. As soon as the portcullis was raised, a pair of posts could be positioned to make any attempt to lower it impossible. Leaving the ships immediately and charging into the city, the army would have control of Xounges within the hour.”

King Gax gave a dismal groan. “The years have made me heavy. Needless to say, changes will be made.”

“A good idea,” said Aillas. “But for now, more urgent affairs press on us, and we must plan for all contingencies. By that I mean Sir Kreim.”

The afternoon passed. At sunset King Gax took his evening meal of gruel with a few morsels of mince-meat, chopped apple and a goblet of white wine. An hour later the guards at the door were changed, and new guards came on duty. Rohan indignantly reported that the two new guards were cousins to Sir Kreim's spouse, of rank far too high to be standing guard duty by night. Bribes had clearly been paid and influence exerted: so declared Rohan, furious, if for no other reason than the contravention to his

personal authority.

Darkness came to Xounges. King Gax composed himself for sleep and Rohan retired to his own chambers.

Jehaundel became quiet. In Gax's bedchamber the fire burned low on the hearth. A pair of wall-sconces on the back wall cast soft yellow light, leaving the high groined ceiling in shadow.

A faint thud of footsteps sounded from the hall. The door eased open with a quavering creak. A heavy shape stood silhouetted against the light of torches in the hall.

The figure came quietly into the room. From his bed Gax croaked: “Who is there? Ho, guards! Rohan!”

The dark shape spoke softly. “Gax, good King Gax, you have lived long enough and now your time has come.”

Gax called out huskily: “Rohan! Where are you? Bring the guards!”

Rohan appeared from his chamber. “Sir Kreim, what does this mean? You are disturbing King Gax!”

“Rohan, if you wish to serve me both here and later in Dahaut, hold your peace. Gax has outlived his time and

now must die. He will smother under a pillow and it will be as if he died in his sleep. Interfere at your peril!”

Sir Kreim went to the bed and picked up a pillow.

“Hold!” said a voice. Sir Kreim looked up to discover a man watching him from across the room with sword drawn. “Sir Kreim, it is you who are about to die.”

“Who are you?” rasped Sir Kreim.  
“Guards! Carve me the liver of this importunate fool!”

From Rohan’s chamber three Troice seamen came to stand by the door; when

the guards entered they were seized and stabbed. Sir Kreim rushed to attack Aillas; steel clashed and Sir Kreim reeled back from a wound in his chest. Before he could renew the attack, one of the seamen leapt on his back, bore him to the floor and stabbed him through the heart.

Again silence held the room. Gax spoke: "Rohan, call porters; have them carry these hulks out and throw them over the cliff. See to it; I am going back to sleep."

## IV

ON THE DAY BEFORE THE  
CORONATION, Aillas Went OUT Upon



Xounges' fabled walls. They were, he decided, as proof against assault as tradition had asserted, if guarded by alert defenders.

He stood on the battlements, looking out across the Skyre, one foot in an embrasure and leaning against the lichen-stained merlon. Farther along the battlements he noticed Duke Luhalcx, with his brother Duke Ankhalcx, both in flowing black cloaks, and Tatzel, wearing a gray wool knee-length frock, a black cape, gray stockings which left her knees bare and black ankle boots. A red felt cap with the shortest of bills controlled her hair against the efforts of the wind. After a single glance, Aillas

paid no more heed to the three, and he was moderately surprised when Duke Luhalcx came purposefully toward him, leaving Ankhalcx and Tatzel together fifty yards along the parapet.

Aillas brought himself erect, and as Luhalcx stopped before him, gave a formal half-bow. "Good day, sir."

Luhalcx bowed curtly. "Sir, I have given much thought to the circumstances which have brought us into contact. There are certain ideas which I feel compelled to place before you."

"Speak."

“I have tried to put myself into your position, and I believe that I can understand how you might be prompted to pursue and capture the Lady Tatzel; I too consider her a person of great charm. She has described to me in detail your journey across the wilderness, and your general courtesy and concern for her comfort, which clearly was not due to any regard you might have felt for her status.”

“That is quite true.”

“You showed more forbearance than I myself might have used in a similar case, or so I fear. I am puzzled by your motives.”

“They are personal, and reflect no discredit upon the Lady Tatzel. Essentially, I cannot bring myself to use a woman by force.”

Luhalcx gave a wintry smile. “Your motives would seem to do you credit, even if, in so saying, I seem implicitly to be denigrating the policies of the Ska. . . . Well, no matter. My own feelings translate into gratitude that Tatzel escaped harm, and so, for want of anything better, I give you my thanks, for at least this particular phase of the affair.”

Aillas shrugged. “Sir, I recognize your courtesy, but I cannot accept your thanks,

since my acts were not intended for your benefit; if anything, to the contrary. Let us simply leave matters as they are.”

Duke Luhalcx showed a rueful half-smile. “You are a prickly fellow; this is for certain.”

“You are my enemy. Have you received recent news from home?”

“Nothing fresh. What has happened?”

“According to the captain of the ship, Ulf troops, with the aid of a Troice contingent, have retaken Suarach and destroyed the Ska garrison.”

Luhalcx's face became still. "If true, that is grim news."

"From my point of view, you had no business in Suarach to begin with."

Aillas paused a moment, then said: "I will advise you, and if you are wise you will follow my instructions to the letter. Return to Castle Sank. Pack all your precious relics, your portraits and mementos from antique times, and your books; remove these to Skaghane, because soon, soon, soon, Castle Sank must burn to the ground."

"You make me a harsh forecast," said Luhalcx. "It is futile; we will never forsake our dream. First, we will take

the Elder Isles, then we shall exact our great revenge upon the Goths who drove us from Norway.”

“The Ska have a long memory.”

“We dream as a people; we remember as a people! I myself have seen visions in the fire, and they came, not as illusions, but as recollections. We climbed the glaciers to find a lost valley; we fought red-headed warriors mounted on mammoths; we destroyed the cannibal half-men who had lived in the land for a million years. I remember this as if I had been there myself.”

Aillas pointed. “Sir, look where those

waves come sweeping in from the Atlantic! They seem irresistible! After a thousand miles of steady onward motion they strike the cliff and in an instant they are broken into foam.”

Duke Luhalcx said shortly: “I have heard your remarks and I will give them due attention. One final matter which preys on my mind: the safety of my spouse, the Lady Chraio.”

“I have no knowledge of her. If she were captured, I am sure that she has been treated no less courteously than you would deal with a captive Ulfish woman.”



Duke Luhalcx grimaced, bowed and, turning away, rejoined Duke Ankhalcx and Tatzel. For a few minutes they stood looking across the battlements, then turned and went off in the direction they had come.

During the late afternoon, a dense purple-gray overcast rose from the west to obscure the sun, and early twilight settled over Xounges. The night was totally dark and brought torrents of rain at irregular intervals, which dwindled as dawn tinted the sky with a wet glow the colour of eggplant.

Two hours into the morning, the rain had become a misty drizzle, and the sky

showed signs of clearing for the coronation later in the day. Aillas came running up from the harbour: through the tunnel, along cobbled passages, across the market square, now deserted, and entered Jehaundel by the massive front portal.

In the foyer Aillas gave his wet cloak into the care of a footman, then set off down the main gallery. From the great hall came Tatzel, where she had been observing preparations for the coronation. She saw Aillas, hesitated, then came forward, looking neither right nor left. Aillas felt a pang of déjà vu; once again he stood in the gallery at Castle Sank, with Tatzel marching

toward him, unheeding of all save her private thoughts.

Tatzel approached, her eyes fixed on a point far down the gallery; clearly Aillas was not in her good graces. For a moment Aillas thought that she might pass him by without speaking, but at the last instant she came to a grudging halt, and swept him up and down with a quick cool glance. “Why do you look at me so oddly?”

“A peculiar mood came over me. I fancied myself back at Castle Sank. I still feel the chill.”

Tatzel’s drooping mouth twitched. “I am

surprised that you are still here. Is not the ship's captain anxious to put to sea?"

"He has decided to delay sailing for still a day or so, which allows me time to finish my business."

Tatzel looked blank. "I thought that you came here to bring me to my father."

"That, for a fact, was one of my purposes. Then, King Gax has graciously allowed my attendance at today's ceremony, which will certainly be a historic occasion, and I would not care to miss it."

Tatzel gave an indifferent shrug. "It does

not seem all that important to me, but perhaps you are right. Now I must go and make my own preparations, though no one will be paying attention to me.”

“Perhaps I will watch you,” said Aillas. “The expressions of your face have always intrigued me.”

## V

RAIN CONTINUED INTO THE AFTERNOON, sweeping down upon Xounges from a sky of black gloom: rattling on the tiles, hissing into the slategreen waters of the Skyre.

Within the great hall of Jehaundel, a

dank half-light entered through high narrow windows. Four great fires cast a more cheerful glow, which which was augmented by a series of wall-sconces.

A dozen gonfalons, representing the glory of Old Ulfland, hung on the stone walls, their colours faded, the deeds they celebrated now forgotten; still, the sight of the ancient standards brought moisture to many eyes among those Ulfs who had come to witness the coronation of the new king-a transition which all felt must extinguish the last remaining sparks of ancient honour.

In addition to the lords of the great old houses, there were present a company of

lesser nobility, as well as a party of eight Ska, standing austerely to the side, the ambassadors of Godelia and Dahaut, and a group from the Troice warship.

A pair of middle-aged heralds blew fanfares; Sir Pertane, the High Chancellor, called out: “I announce the imminent arrival of His Majesty, King Gax!”

Six footmen carried in a platform supporting a throne in which sat King Gax. By a ramp the footmen mounted to a low dais, lowered the platform and departed. King Gax, wearing a robe of red plush trimmed with black fur, and wearing the crown of North Ulfland over

a red cap, raised a fragile hand to the company. "I bid you all welcome. Be seated, those who so desire; those who prefer the support of their feet to that of their haunches: let them stand."

A shifting and a murmur stirred the company.

King Gax spoke again. "Death has come to knock at my door. I am loath to let him enter my house; he is said to be a pertinacious guest. Hark! I hear his knock even now! Can others hear this sound, or does it tap-tap-tap for my ears only? No matter, no matter; but still I must do a last deed before I receive my caller.



“Notice all! I wear the ancient crown!  
Once it spoke loud of glory and place!  
This was the crown of Ulfland, when  
ours loomed large among the states of  
the Elder Isles! Then there was no  
‘North’ and no ‘South’ to our land; it  
united all the west of Hybras, from  
Godelia to Cape Farewell! Today I  
wear a symbol of helplessness and  
defeat. My realm extends only as far as  
the sound of my voice. The Ska have  
conquered our land, and made a  
wilderness where folk once tilled the  
soil of their farmsteads.”

King Gax gazed around the room. He  
pointed a white finger. “There stand the  
Ska. Duke Luhalcx advises me to

abdicate in favor of Duke Ankhalcx. Duke Luhalcx knows our ancient laws and his candidate is at hand. Duke Luhalcx argues that by naming a Ska ruler I do no more than legitimize actuality.

“Luhalcx argues with a good voice, but others have argued with voices even better. They assert that if the crown passed not to the Ska but to the present King of South Ulfland, then once again the land would be joined under a rule which is committed to expulsion of the Ska and restoration of the old order. These arguments are compelling, as in South Ulfland there is already a new sense of pride and adequacy. South

Ulfish forces have already dealt hard blows to the Ska, and are only just starting to bring their power to bear.

“Such arguments cannot be ignored. The same head that wears the crown of South Ufland shall wear this crown which now graces my unworthy old head.”

Duke Luhalcx cried out in a passion: “The ceremony is void unless the South Ulfish king is on hand to receive the crown from your head, and by your hand! You have cited the law yourself!”

“Indeed I have done so. We will go through the form. Sir Pertane, utter your summons!”

The High Chancellor called out to the company: “Where is he whom Gax, King of North Ulfland, has commanded to appear before him? I refer in specific, to Aillas, King of Dascinet and Troicinet, Scola and South Ulfland. Let him announce himself if indeed he is present.”

Aillas stepped forward and approached the dais. “I am here.”

“Aillas, will you accept from me this crown of our mutual ancestors, and wear it with all possible honour?”

I will do so.”

“Aillas, will you defend this land against its enemies and meanwhile nurture the weak and succor the impoverished? Will you guard the lamb from the wolf, restore the waif to its parent, and give the same justice to high and low alike?”

“I will do all these, so far as I am able.”

“Aillas, will you conduct yourself in full kingly fashion, eschewing both gluttony and venery, and restraining the cruel display of your wrath, and ever let mercy temper your justice?”

“I will do all these, insofar as I am capable.”

“Aillas, come forward.” Gax kissed Aillas’ forehead and Aillas saw that tears were streaming down the haggard cheeks. “Aillas, my son, and I wish that you were my son indeed, you have made me a happy man! In joy I tender you this crown and place it on your head. You are now Aillas, King of Ulfland, and let none in all the world dispute my decree! Druids, where are you? Come forth and sanctify this deed to Cronus the Father, to Lug the Bright, and to Apollo the Wise.”

From the shadows came a gaunt man in a hooded brown robe. Around Aillas’ neck he hung a necklace of red holly berries, then crushing a berry in his

fingers, he rubbed it on Aillas' cheeks and forehead, meanwhile chanting in a tongue incomprehensible to Aillas. Then, with no further ritual, he returned to the shadows.

Sir Pertane called out in a sonorous voice: "Let all know that, by the laws of this land, here stands the new King of Ulfland, and let none be at confusion in this regard! Heralds, go forth about the city and announce this great glad news!"

The footmen, at a signal from Gax, came forward and lifting the platform carried him from the room.

Aillas went to sit in a chair on the dais.

“Gentlemen and ladies: for the moment I can tell you this. In South Ulfland we have already made life somewhat better for gentility and commoner alike. Our navy controls the Narrow Sea; where the Ska once sailed out like pirates, now they dare not leave port. On land we will continue our successful tactics; we shall inflict casualties upon the Ska while taking as few as possible ourselves. This is a kind of warfare which they cannot support, and sooner or later they must draw back to the Foreshore. Luhalcx, you have heard me; I make no secret of our strategy. You have never blenched at the sight of Ulfish blood; prepare yourself for the colour of your own Ska blood! Would



you send a grand army south to take my town Doun Darric? Do so! You will find the town empty, with all the troops pillaging your Foreshore, so that not a single Ska house is left standing. Then we will turn south and meet you, and harass your army as hounds bait a bear, and very few of you will win back to Skaghane.”

“That is a grim prediction.”

“It is only the start. Troice warships now sail the Narrow Sea as easily as they do the Lir. Presently the raids on Skaghane will begin: smoke will rise from this town and that, and again and again, to your despair. Take my advice

and end your rapacity!”

“I will convey your message to my peers.”

“Truly I hope that they will be swayed by my words. As for your stay here in Xounges, be at comfort. You came as guests; you may leave as guests, at your own best convenience. And when you describe these events to your fellows, I hope that you will stress my prediction: to the effect that, unless they renounce their ancient obsession, as I have renounced my revenge against you, they will know great grief.”

“King Aillas, we are accustomed to

grief.”

Looking beyond Duke Luhalcx, Aillas took note of Tatzel standing somewhat apart. He looked into her pale face, and for a moment was urged to cross the room to speak to her. Certain of the Ska moved so as to cross his line of vision and block her from his view; he turned away, and went, rather, to Gax’s bedchamber, where he thought that he might sit in company with the old man.

Arriving at the royal suite he knocked at the door, which was opened by Rohan. Aillas spoke quietly: “I came to sit with King Gax, if he is not too tired after the ceremony.”

“Sire, you are not in time. King Gax will never tire again; he is dead.”

## VI

AILLAS SPENT THREE BUSY DAYS in Xounges. He participated in ceremonies of gloomy pomp, to the braying of druid horns at the funeral of King Gax; he reorganized the system of guards and sentries, and tried to appoint Rohan as his viceroy, without success. “Appoint Sir Pertane to this post,” said Rohan. “He has been more than faithful to King Gax and is a great one for place and status. He is also indecisive and even a trifle dull; instruct him, therefore,

that I will direct policy and that he must follow my instructions, which will trouble him not at all.”

“In short order I hope to base three or four companies of good troops here at Xounges. Since we can attack anywhere along the Skyre, the Ska will know great anguish and trouble in defending themselves. In this region they are obviously much over-extended; they must either commit two or three battalions to guard the Skyre and the river Solander, and perhaps even Lake Quyvern, or they must retreat from this entire area, and then the road to Poelitetz comes under our attack. If they send their battalions here, they weaken themselves

elsewhere. No matter how valiant they are, they cannot defend so large a territory from an enemy who will not fight them in the manner they prefer.”

“I am convinced that you are right,” said Rohan. “For the first time in many years I see a glimmer of hope for us. Be assured that in your absence, Xounges will be guarded. Further, I suggest that you send a military commission here, to train our men so that they may take their place in your army. Our years of passivity are at an end.”

In the early morning Aillas sailed from Xounges. Rounding Tawny Head, the warship sailed south down the Narrow

Sea, encountering only another Troice ship along the way, the Ska now making their passages by night.

Aillas left the ship at Oaldes and, taking horse, rode at speed to Doun Darric, where he received a great welcome from Sir Tristano, Sir Redyard, and others of his staff, who, after three weeks, had become much concerned by his absence.

“I assured them of your safety,” said Sir Tristano. “I have an instinct in this regard; it told me you were off on some remarkable adventure. Was my instinct correct?”

“Absolutely!” Aillas reported the events

which had taken him so far afield, to the fascination of his audience.

“We can in no way match your tale,” said Sir Tristano. “Nothing of note has occurred since the taking of Suarach. We now range into North Ulfland at will, alert for cheap victories, but these are hard to come by, since the Ska no longer venture abroad in small parties.” He brought out a packet. “These are the despatches from Domreis, which, in your absence, I have taken the liberty to read. There is one which I find somewhat mysterious. It is signed ‘S-T’, which would seem to indicate Sion-Tansifer, but the words are not his.”



“That is how Yane keeps his invisibility. If the despatch is intercepted and something in it is discreditable or off-colour, then Sion-Tansifer gets the blame.” He read the despatch:

The cog Parsis, sailing from Lyonesse Town, has arrived at Domreis. The passengers include a certain Visbhume, who would appear to be a sorcerer of no great force, and also a spy in the service of King Casmir. Once before he came over on the Parsis, and put many sly questions regarding Dhrun and Gfyneth, to Ehirme and other members of her family, regarding which they have only recently informed me. Visbhume now has taken himself to the village Wysk,

near Watershade, where he roams the forest, purportedly in search of rare herbs. He is being kept under surveillance, but something bulks below the surface and the bodes are not good. Casmir of course is at his striving, but who stands behind Casmir? I am tempted to suggest that you come home, preferably in company with Shimrod. S-T

Aillas reread the despatch, frowning at every word. He looked to Sir Tristano: “Have you seen Shimrod?”

“Not recently. Were you expecting to find him here?”

“No. . . . It appears that I must return to Domreis at all speed. When terriers bark, one may ignore them. When the old hound bays, then one leaps for his weapons.”

## VII

THE WARSHIP PANNUC arrived at Domreis harbour on the morning of a sunny summer day and tied up at a dock hard under the walls of Miraldra. Without waiting for the gangway, Aillas jumped ashore and ran up into the castle. He found the seneschal Sir Este dozing in the chamber off the great hall which he used for his office.

Sir Este jumped to his feet. “Your Highness, we had no word of your coming!”

“No matter. Where is the Prince Dhrun?”

“He has been gone three days, sir: out to Watershade for the summer.”

“And the Princess Glyneth?”

“At Watershade as well.”

“And Sir Yane?”

“He is somewhere about the castle, sir, or perhaps in the town, Or he might be at his estate. In truth, I have not seen him

since yesterday.”

“Search him out, if you please, and send him to my chambers.”

Aillas bathed in hastily provided ewers of warm water and changed into fresh garments. When he came out into his parlour, he found Yane waiting for him. “At last!” said Yane. “The far-ranging king returns, preceded by startling rumor.”

Aillas laughed and threw his arms around Yane’s shoulders. “I have much to tell you! Would you be surprised to learn that I am now King of all Ulfland, in full formality? And no doubt to a

bitter griping of Casmir's royal bowels. No? You are not surprised?"

"The news came two days ago by pigeon."

"I have other surprises still! You remember Duke Luhalcx of Castle Sank?"

"I remember him well."

"You will be pleased to learn that I twisted his nose in a most satisfying style! He now rues the day that he offended Cargus, Yane and Aillas!"

"Now there is fine news indeed! Tell me

more!”

“I captured the Lady Tatzel and took her across the moors as my slave. Had I bedded her as she expected, she would have hated me as an insolent brute. I gave her back to her father untouched and now she hates me even more.”

“Such is the nature of the female race.”

“True. I expected effusive thanks and tears of joy and invitations from Tatzel, but I had none of these: only a surly ingratitude. More urgently, what of your bodes and premonitions which brought me home at such haste? Evidently they have come to nothing!”

“Not so! Nothing has changed, and I feel imminence as heavy as before.”

“All on account of the sorcerer Visbhume?”

“Exactly so. He excites my deepest suspicions. He is Casmir’s agent: so much is incontrovertible, even though the facts lead to more mysteries.”

“And what are the facts?”

“Three times he has visited Haidion, where he was favoured with immediate audiences. He came to Troicinet aboard the Parsis and made careful inquiries in regard to Dhrun and Glyneth, and took



the news back to Casmir. Recently he came again aboard the Parsis and at this moment sojourns in a village not ten miles from Watershade. Now do you understand my suspicion?”

“Not only do I understand it; I share it. He is still at Wysk?”

“He lodges at the Cat and Plough: needless to say, under surveillance. Sometimes he studies a book with leather covers; sometimes he rides in an absurd little pony cart; sometimes he walks out into the forest, searching for rare herbs. The village girls give him a wide berth; he is always after them to cut his hair or rub his back or sit on his

lap and play a game he calls ‘Pouncing Ferrets’. When they will not go into the woods to hunt herbs with him, he becomes peevish.”

Aillas heaved a fretful sigh. “Tomorrow I must consult my ministers, or they will think harshly of me. Then I will ride out to Watershade... . With magic at hand I would be happy to see Shimrod. But I cannot send for him every time one or the other of us feels a bode. He would quickly lose patience with me. Ah well, we shall see. Now I am ravenously hungry. The food aboard the Pannuc is at best only adequate. Perhaps the kitchen can find us something savory for our dinner: a fowl, or some ham and eggs,

with some turnips in butter and some leeks.”

As they ate, Yane told of King Casmir’s secret warship. With many precautions the hull had been launched from the ways in Blaloc, and according to all reports it was a fine hull indeed, built of staunch oak and sound bronze nails, with low freeboard and lateen rig for crisp sailing, and ports for rowing with forty oars when the winds went calm.

To evade notice, the hull had been towed by night from the shipyard to a fitting-out dock further up the Murmeil Estuary, where the rigging would have been installed. Instead, Troice ships had

closed in; the tow-lines were cut and the hull drifted down the estuary and out into the open sea. At dawn, Troice ships picked up the line and towed the hull to the south of Dascinet and into one of the deep narrow inlets, where the hull, suitably rigged, would eventually join the Troice navy. Yane reported that Casmir, raging over the loss, had pulled half the hair from his beard.

“Let Casmir build ships by the dozen!” cried Aillas. “We will continue to take them until not a hair remains to his face!”

As Aillas and Yane took their cheese and fruit, Dhrun burst into the chamber,

travel-worn and wild-eyed. Aillas jumped to his feet. “Dhrun! What is amiss?”

“Glyneth is gone! She has disappeared from Watershade! I could not prevent it; it happened the day before I arrived!”

“How did she disappear? Did someone take her?”

“She went wandering into the Wild Woods as she often has done; she never came back! No one is sure but a certain odd fellow named Visbhume is thought to be responsible. He is also gone.”

Aillas sagged into a chair. The world,

only minutes before so bright and fair, had suddenly gone gray. A dull weight pressed upon his heart. “Naturally you made a search?”

“I went out at once with Noser and Bunce. They traced her well enough to a glade in the forest and there the trail died. I called out searchers, and a hundred men sought her high and low, and they are still searching. I rode here to get help, and I have not stopped along the way except to change horses! I am greatly relieved to find you, for I am at my wit’s end!”

Aillas threw his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Good Dhrun, I could have

done no more or no better! There is magic at work, and we cannot cope with it.”

“Then we must send for Shimrod!”

“That we will do! Come!”

Aillas led the way to the study at the side of his parlour. On a taboret a stuffed owl sat on a perch. From the owl's beak dangled a blue cord by a string with a gold bead at the tip. “Ah!” cried Aillas. “Shimrod has preceded us!”

He gently pulled at the blue cord and the stuffed owl spoke: “I have gone to

Watershade. Join me there.”



# Chapter 14

## I

THE SEASON CAME AROUND to the high solstice, a time of great significance for astronomers. The night skies were ruled by the gentle constellations of summer: Ophiuchus, Lyra, Cepheus, Deneb the Swan. Arcturus and Spica, noble stars of spring, sank in the west; from the east rose Altair to stare down upon sullen Antares, where Scorpio sprawled across the south.

Under the cool stars and everywhere across the Elder Isles folk conducted

their endeavors: sometimes in joy, as at King Gax's coronation of Aillas; sometimes in fury, as in the case of King Casmir and his stolen ship. Elsewhere husbands chided wives and wives discerned flaws in their husbands; at village inns and wayside taverns boasting, gluttony and wine-swilling were rife, to the thud of mugs, the clinking of coins and gusts of laughter. At Kernuun's Antler, on the shore of Lake Quyvern, avarice was embodied in the person of the innkeeper Dildahl, and here, perhaps, is an appropriate occasion to recount further incidents in regard to Dildahl which otherwise might be lost in the spate of larger events.

Two days before the solstice, a group of druids came to Kernuun's Antler for their midday meal. Despite double portions of Dildahl's good boiled beef and braised lamb shanks, their conversation was pitched in tones of vehement indignation. At last Dildahl could no longer contain his curiosity. Putting a question, he learned that a band of sacrilegious outlaws had stormed the sacred islet Alziel, put torches to the great wicker crow and liberated the sacrificial victims, so that the usual rite was no longer feasible. The circumstance, so the druids asserted, was somehow connected with the accession of a new king at Xounges,

who had sent out gangs of cutthroats to harass and ambush the Ska.

“Outrageous!” declared Dildahl. “But if they were in pursuit of Ska, why did they destroy the crow and so spoil the rite?”

“We can only believe that the new king’s personal fetish is the crow. Next year we will construct a goat, and no doubt all will be well.”

Later in the afternoon a pair of middle-aged travellers arrived at the inn. Dildahl, watching from a window, adjudged them persons of no great distinction, although their garments and the silver medals on their hats indicated

a decent level of prosperity, and each rode a horse of obvious spirit and quality.

The two dismounted, tied their horses to a rail and entered the inn. They found Dildahl, the tall, saturnine innkeeper, behind the counter in the common room and requested food and lodging for the night, giving their names as Harbig and Dussel.

Dildahl agreed to supply their needs in whatever style they desired, then, citing the unalterable rule of the house, he tendered to each a document for signature. Harbig and Dussel, reading, discovered a firm stipulation that should

the visitor fail to pay his score, he must surrender and forfeit his horse, saddle and bridle, in full and even discharge of his debt.

Harbig, the elder of the travellers, frowned at the uncompromising terms used in the contract. "Is not this language somewhat harsh? After all, we are honest men."

Dussel asked: "Or are your prices so high that one must pay the worth of a horse for a night's accommodation?"

"See for yourself!" declared Dildahl. "There on the board I advertise my menu for the day. Tonight I serve boiled beef

with horseradish and cabbage, or, should one prefer, a good platter of lamb shanks braised with peas and garlic, or a savory soup of lentils. The prices are marked plain and clear.”

Harbig studied the board. “Your tariffs would seem wholesome but not severe,” he stated. “If the portions are of satisfactory size, and the garlic is not scamped in the cooking, you shall find no complaint in this quarter. Dussel, am I correct in this?”

“In every respect, save one,” said Dussel, a person moonfaced and a trifle portly. “We must verify the charges and subcharges for our lodging.”

“Quite so; a wise precaution! Landlord, how do you quote our room-rent, stated in toto, inclusive of all extras, imposts, fees for water, heating, cleaning and ventilation, and with free access to the latrine?”

Dildahl quoted rates for his various styles of accommodation, and the two travellers settled upon a chamber with rates and amenities to their satisfaction.

“Now then,” said Dildahl. “All is in order, except your signatures on the documents. Here, and here, if you please.

Harbig still held back. “All seems in



order, but why must we subject our poor horses to the shameful burden of Hens? Somehow I find the condition a source of anxiety.”

Dussel nodded in thoughtful agreement. “It seems to ensure a nervous visit for the traveller.”

“Aha!” cried Dildahl. “You cannot imagine the sly tricks and feats of criminal cunning which the ordinary innkeeper must endure! Never will I forget this apparently innocent young couple who rode down from the Brakes and commanded from me my best. I kindly obliged and served to their order, so that the whole kitchen was in an

uproar with the preparation of special dishes and the serving of fine wines. In the morning, when I presented my modest little account, they claimed penury. ‘We have no money!’ they told me, merry as larks. I said: Then I fear I must take your horses!’ They laughed again. ‘We have no horses! We traded them all for a boat!’ That day I learned a bitter and costly lesson. Now I keep custody of my surety, in my own barn!”

“A sorry tale!” said Dussel. “Well then, Harbig: what of this paper? Shall we sign?”

“What harm can come of it?” asked Harbig. “These prices seem fair and we

are neither paupers nor fly-by-nights.”

“So be it,” said Dussel. “However I must, in all conscience, add a notation. Landlord, I write: ‘My horse is extremely valuable and must have excellent care.’ “

“A good idea!” said Harbig. “I will write the same... . There! And tonight I shall put prudence behind me! Though it cost a round penny or more, I vow that I will partake of Dildahl’s special boiled beef with horseradish sauce and good bread and butter!”

“I am heartily of your persuasion!” declared Dussel. At suppertime, Harbig

and Dussel came handily to the common room, and took their places at the table. When Dildahl came to see to their pleasure, Harbig and Dussel both commanded a goodly portion of boiled beef. Dildahl dolefully reported that the meat had burned in the pot and all had been thrown out to the dogs. “Still, we have fine fish to offer: indeed, fish is our specialty!”

Harbig said: “I think that, in lieu of good beef, I will make do with lamb shanks, and let there be no stinting with the garlic!”

“For me the same!” declared Dussel. “And shall we not also crack a bottle of

good but inexpensive red wine?”

“Exactly in order!” declared Harbig.

“Dussel, you are a man of exquisite discrimination.”

“Alas!” sighed Dildahl. “At noon six druids arrived and each ate lamb shanks with both cheeks, so that tonight the kitchen boy ate the remaining scraps for his supper. But no matter; I can offer a succulent pie of crayfish tails, or a brace of fine brown trout, at their prime, sizzling in butter and vinegar.”

Harbig scanned the board. “They are not written on the menu. How are the prices? Fair, or so I expect, with the

whole lake at your doorstep?”

“When it comes to fish, we are at our best! What of two dozen pilchard, with lemons and sorrel?”

“Toothsome, no doubt, but price, man! What of the price?”

“Oh ha ha, I am not certain; it varies with the catch.”

Harbig dubiously eyed the menu. “Lentil soup might be tasty.”

“Soup is off,” said Dildahl. “What of a plate of splendid salmon roe, with capers and butter, with a salad of cress

and parsley?”

“And the price?”

Dildahl gave his hand a deprecating wave. “It might be more or it might be less.”

“I rather fancy the salmon roe,” said Dussel. “Tonight that shall be my meal.”

“I shall dine on trout,” said Harbig. “Let there be an adequacy of side-dishes.”

Dildahl bowed and rubbed his hands. “So it shall be.”

The two were served their fish, which they consumed with gusto, along with

two bottles of wine. Soon thereafter they sought their beds.

In the morning, Dildahl provided a breakfast of porridge with curds. Harbig and Dussel ate briskly, and then called out for their scores.

With a grim smile Dildahl brought each man his tally.

Harbig cried out aghast. “Am I reading correctly? Or are the figures upside-down? My score comes to nineteen silver florins fourpence!”

Dussel was likewise dumbfounded. “For a platter of roe I am accustomed to



paying no more than a few groats or maybe a good red penny; I seem to see here a demand for twenty-one silver florins! Harbig, are we awake? Or still asleep and roaming some never-never land?”

“You are awake and my prices are real,” said Dildahl shortly. “At Kemuun’s Antler, fish is very dear, since it is prepared by secret recipes.”

“So be it,” said Harbig. “If pay we must, then pay we will.”

The two travellers glumly opened their wallets and paid over silver coins, to the sum required. Harbig said: “Now, if you

please, bring us our horses, as we are in a hurry to be off and on our way.”

“Immediately!” Dildahl called an order to the kitchen boy, who ran out to the barn. A moment later he returned faster than he had gone. “Sir, the barn is broken open! The door hangs loose and the horses are gone!”

“What!” cried Harbig. “Do I hear aright? My great champion Nebo which I value at a hundred pieces of gold? Or even two hundred?”

In shock Dussel cried: “And my prize steed from Morocco, which cost me one hundred golden crowns, but which I

would not sell for three hundred?”

Harbig said sternly: “Dildahl, your joke has gone far enough! Produce our horses upon this instant, or else pay us over their value, and precious horses indeed they were! For Nebo I demand two hundred crowns of gold!”

Dussel declared his loss to be even greater: “For Ponzante I need two hundred and fifty gold crowns even to approach a settlement.”

Dildahl finally found his tongue. “These cited prices are absolutely outrageous! For a single gold crown I can buy the finest of steeds!”

“Ah ha ha! Our horses are like your fish. Pay on this instant four hundred and fifty gold crowns!”

“You cannot enforce this insane demand!” declared Dildahl. “Be off with you, or the stablemen will beat you well, and cast you into the lake!”

“Trouble yourself only to look along the road,” said Harbig. “You will notice an encampment of twenty soldiers, from the army of Aillas, King of Ulfland. Reimburse us our stolen horses, or prepare to kick from the royal gibbet.”

Dildahl ran to the door and with pendulous lower lip sagging, took note

of the encampment. Slowly he turned back to Harbig. “Why have these soldiers come to Lake Quayvern?”

“First, to attack Ska and drive them from the region. Second, to burn the wicker crow and to liberate druid captives. Third, to investigate rumours of villainy at Kernun’s Antler, and to hang the landlord if the charges seem well-grounded.”

Dussel said sternly, “Once more: pay us for our horses or we will call for the king’s protection!”

“But I own no such sum!” Dildahl grimaced. “I will return your florins; that

must suffice.”

“Bah! Not enough! We now take title to the inn, as you take title to your guests’ horses, ‘in full and even exchange’. Dussel, at last you fulfill your dreams! You are the landlord-in-residence at a fine country inn! As a first step, impound all the coins in yonder drawer and the gold in Dildahl’s strongbox.”

“No, no, no!” cried Dildahl. “Not my precious gold!”

Dussel ignored the outcry. “Dildahl, show me the strongbox. Then you must go, and promptly. We will allow you the clothes on your back.”

Dildahl still could not accept his fate.  
“This is an unthinkable turn of events!”

Harbig raised his eyebrows dubiously.  
“Surely you did not believe that you  
could continue robbing your guests  
forever?”

“It is a mistake! Somewhere there must  
be recourse!”

Harbig said: “Be grateful that you deal  
with us, not the sergeant of yonder  
platoon, who already has selected a tree  
and measured a rope.”

Dildahl growled: “I detect strange  
coincidences. How do you know so

much about yonder troop?”

“I am their captain. Dussel, if you must know, has been chief cook at Jehaundel, but with King Gax gone, his services are no longer required, and he has always hoped to keep a country inn. Dussel, am I correct in this?”

“In every respect! Now, Dildahl, show me the strongbox, then be on your way.”

Dildahl set up a great moaning. “Have mercy! My spouse is afflicted in the lower limbs and cannot walk; the veins circle her legs like purple snakes! Must we crawl on our hands and knees in the dust?”



Harbig spoke to Dussel: “Dildahl seems to manage well enough at the stove, and deals especially kindly with fish. Why not keep him at work as pot-boy and under-cook, while his spouse makes herself useful milking the cows, making cheese and butter, digging turnips, carrots and leeks, and working the soil, all from a kneeling position, to spare her sore legs? Entirely by the mercy of King Aillas, of course.”

“Dildahl, what do you say?” demanded Dussel. “Will you serve me faithfully, without complaint or shiftlessness, at my direction?”

Dildahl rolled his eyes high, and

clenched his fists. "If I must, I must."

"Very good. First, point out the location of your, or, better to say, my strongbox."

"It is under the flagstone of my private parlour."

"Now my parlour. You must move at once, out to one of the cottages. Then scour this floor until each plank glows the colour of new straw! I wish to see neither soil nor stain on the floor of the Lakeshore Inn, which is certain to become a rustic resort for the gentility of Xounges!"

## II

TWITTEN's CORNERS, in the Forest of Tantrevalles, was the site each year of three fairs, to which came traders and buyers from all across the Elder Isles, human and halfling alike, each hoping to discover some wonderful charm or trinket or elixir to bring advantage to his life or gold to his wallet.

The first and the last of these so-called 'Goblin Fairs' marked, respectively, the spring and autumn equinoxes. The second, or middle, fair started on that evening known to the druids as 'Pignal aan Haag', to the fairies of Forest Tantrevalles as 'Summersthawn', to the Ska archivists as 'Soltra Nurre', in the language of primaeval Norway: a time

marking the start of the lunar year, defined as the night of the first new moon after the summer solstice. For reasons unknown this night had come to be a time of unusual influences and oblique pressures from entities aroused to sentience. Wanderers of high places often thought to hear the echo of windy voices and the drumming of far galloping hooves.

At the inn known as ‘The Laughing Sun and the Crying Moon’, hard by Twitten’s Corners, the night was known as ‘Freamas’, and meant a spate of incessant toil for Hockshank the innkeeper. Even before Freamas the inn was crowded with folk of many sorts

who had come to mingle in unconventional camaraderie, to sell, to buy, to trade, or only to watch and listen, or perhaps to seek out some long-lost friend, or some defaulted enemy, or to recover an item of which they had been deprived; the yearnings were as disparate as the folk themselves.

Among these folk was Melancthe, who had arrived early to take up the apartment reserved for her use.

For Melancthe the fair was surcease from introspection, an occasion where her presence aroused little attention and less curiosity. Hockshank the landlord was casual in regard to his clientele, so

long as they paid in good silver and gold, caused no nuisance, and exuded no vile, foul nor arresting odors, and his common room knew a wide variety of halflings and hybrids, oddities and nonesuches, as well as persons, like Melanthe, apparently ordinary in their qualities.

Arriving early on the day before Freamas, Melanthe went to watch construction of the booths around the periphery of the meadow. Many merchants already displayed their wares, hoping to engage the visitor of limited means before he spent all his coin elsewhere.

Melancthe went slowly from booth to booth, listening without comment to the excited calls of the hucksters, showing a faint smile when she saw something which pleased her. Along the eastern edge of the meadow she came upon a sign painted in green, yellow and white:

HERE ARE THE PREMISES OF THE  
NOTABLE AND SINGULAR ZUCK

DEALER IN OBJECTS UNIQUE  
UNDER THE FIRMAMENT!

MY PRICES ARE FAIR; MY GOODS  
ARE OFTEN REMARKABLE!

NO GUARANTEES; NO RETURNS;

## NO REFUNDS;

Zuck himself stood behind the counter of his booth: a person short, plump, roundfaced, near-bald, with an innocent inquiring expression. A button of a nose and round plum-coloured eyes pointed at the comers hinted of halfling blood in his heritage, as did a sallow green cast to his complexion.

Zuck regularly sold at the fair, and specialized in *materia magica*: the substances from which potions and elixirs were generally compounded. Today his wares included a novelty. Between a tray of small bronze bottles and cubes of clear gum a single flower



stood displayed in a black vase.

Melancthe's attention was instantly attracted. The flower was notable both for its odd conformation and its colours, so vivid and intense as to be almost palpable: brilliant black, purple, frosty blue and carmine red.

Melancthe could not remove her gaze from the flower. She asked: "Zuck, good Zuck: what flower is that?"

"Lovely lady, that I cannot say. A fellow of the forest brought me this single bloom that I might gauge the mood of the market."

“Who might be this wonderful gardener?”

Zuck laid his finger beside his nose and showed Melanthe a knowing grin. “The person is a falloy and of a distant nature; he insists upon anonymity, so that he will not be subjected to lengthy theoretical discussions, or stealthy attempts to learn his secret.”

“The flowers, then, must grow somewhere in the forest nearby.”

“Quite so. The flowers are sparse and each is more magnificent than the next.”

“Then you have seen others?”

Zuck blinked. “As a matter of fact: no. The falloy is a great one for hyperbole, and avaricious to boot. However, I have insisted upon moderate prices for the sake of my reputation.”

“I must buy the flower; what, in fact, is your price?” Zuck looked blandly up toward the sky. “The day is almost done, and I like to end with an easy sale, to serve as an omen for tomorrow. For you, lovely lady, I will quote an almost trifling sum: five crowns of gold.”

Melanthe looked at Zuck in innocent surprise. “So much gold for a single flower?”

“Ah bah, does the price seem high? In that case, take it for three crowns, as I am in a hurry to shutter my booth.”

“Zuck, dear Zuck: I seldom carry coins of gold!”

Zuck’s voice became somewhat flat.

“What coins then do you carry?”

“Look! A pretty silver florin! For you, good Zuck, for your very own, and I will take the flower.”

Melancthe reached across the counter and lifted the flower from the vase. Zuck looked dubiously at the coin. “If this is for me, what remains for the falloy?”

Melancthe held the flower to her nose and kissed the petals. “We will pay him when next he brings us flowers. I want them all, every one!”

“It is a poor way to do business,” grumbled Zuck. “But I suppose that you must prevail.”

“Thank you, dear Zuck! The flower is superb, and its perfume likewise! It exhales a draught from the very shores of paradise!”

“Ah well,” said Zuck. “Tastes differ, and I sense only a rather disreputable chife.”

“It is rich,” said Melancthe. “It opens doors into rooms where I have never looked before.”

Zuck mused: “A bloom of such evocation is definitely undervalued at a single silver bit.”

“Then here is another, to guarantee my interests! Remember, all the flowers must be sold to me, and me alone!”

Zuck bowed. “So it shall be, though you must be prepared to pay the fair price!”

“You shall not find me wanting. When does the gardener come again?”

“As to that, I cannot be sure, since he is a falloy.”

### III

WHEN DUSK FELL OVER THE MEADOW Melancthe returned to the inn, and presently appeared in the common room. She went to a table in the shadows. For her supper she was served a tureen bubbling with a stew of hare, mushrooms, ramp, parsley and wine, with a crust of new bread, a conserve of wild currants, and a flask of currant wine. A mote of dust drifted down from above to settle into the wine, where it formed a bubble.

Melancthe, observing the event, instantly became still.

From the bubble issued a small voice, so faint and soft that she bent forward to hear it.

The message was brief; Melancthe sat back, her mouth drooping in annoyance. With a touch of the forefinger she broke the bubble. "Once again," she muttered to herself. "Once again I must use my purple fire to warm this icy seagreen monument to decorum. But I need not mix one with the other-unless the caprice comes on me." She contemplated her flower and inhaled its perfume, while far away at Trilda, Shimrod, studying an



ancient portfolio in his workroom, was visited with a shudder of uneasiness.

Shimrod set the portfolio aside and slowly stood erect. He closed his eyes, and into his mind drifted the image of Melanthe, as if she floated in dark water, nude and relaxed, hair drifting loose beside her face.

Shimrod frowned off across the room. At a basic and elementary level, the image was stimulating; on another level, It aroused only skepticism.

Shimrod pondered a moment or two in the silence of his workroom, then reached out and tapped a small silver

bell.

“Speak!” said a voice.

“Melancthe has come floating along a dark stream and into my mind,” said Shimrod. “She wore a minimum of garments, which is to say, none at all. She broke into my studies I and started my blood to moving; then she departed, smiling in a manner of cool insolence. She would not have troubled herself without a purpose.”

“In that case, discover her purpose. Then we will know better how to respond.”

“Tonight is Freemas,” said Shimrod.

“She will be at Twitten’s Comers.

“Go then to Twitten’s Corners.”

“Very well; I will do so.”

Shimrod brought other books and portfolios to his work-table and by the light of a single fat candle, turned the heavy parchment pages until he came upon the text he sought. He read in all concentration, storing the acrid syllables in his mind, while a moth circled the candle flame and finally died in a puff of dust.

Shimrod packed a wallet with articles of convenience and necessity. His

preparations were complete. He went out to the road before Trilda, spoke a few words, closed his eyes and stepped three paces backward. When he opened his eyes he stood beside the tall iron post which marked Twitten's Corners, at the very heart of Forest Tantrevalles. Twilight had given way to night; soft white stars shone down through gaps in the foliage. Fifty yards to the east cheerful yellow light poured from the windows of the Laughing Sun and the Crying Moon into the road, and Shimrod bent his steps in this direction. The iron-bound door had been propped open to admit the airs of the night. At one side Hockshank stood behind his counter, carving a haunch of venison; elsewhere

were tables, benches and chairs, tonight occupied to capacity. In a far shadowed corner Shimrod noted the quiet shape of Melanthe, where she apparently sat absorbed in the reflections on the surface of her wine, seemingly oblivious to Shimrod's presence. Shimrod approached the counter.

Hockshank glanced at him from the side of his golden eyes; halfling blood ran in Hockshank's veins. His hair was like fur the colour of decaying straw; he stood with a slight forward stoop; his feet were covered with gray-yellow fur and instead of toenails he had small black claws. Hockshank said: "I seem to recognize you from past custom, but I

have no head for names, and in any case, should you be seeking accommodation, there is none to be had.”

“I am Shimrod, from Trilda. In the past, by dint of careful thought, or again, by housing certain of your guests in the stable, we have discovered a chamber for my use and your own profit, and both of us have been the happier men for the effort.”

Hockshank never paused in his work.

“Shimrod, I recall you of old, but tonight the stable is already full. If you put down a purse of gold, I still could not find you a room.”

“A small purse, or a large purse?”

“Tonight either will buy you a bench in the common room, but nothing better. Custom presses in on all sides; already I have made some difficult compromises.”

Hockshank pointed his knife. “Notice at the table yonder the three sturdy matrons of imposing mien?”

Shimrod turned to look. “Their dignity is impressive.”

“Just so. They are Sacred Virgins at the Temple of Dis, in Dahaut. I have assigned them to a dormitory of six beds along with the three gentlemen yonder

with the grape-leaves in their hair. I hope that they may reconcile their philosophical differences without disturbing others in the inn.”

“What of the lady sitting alone in the corner?”

Hockshank glanced across the room. “She is Melancthe the demiwitch and occupies the apartments behind the Door of the Two Green Lizards.”

“Perhaps you might induce her to share her apartments with me.”

Hockshank paused in his carving. “If only all were so deftly done, I would be



there myself, and you could share the top of the oven with Dame Hockshank.”

Shimrod turned away and went to a table at the side of the room, where he dined on venison, with currants and barley.

Melancthe at last chose to notice his presence. Crossing the room, she slipped into the chair opposite him. In a light voice she asked: “I have always considered you a very paragon of gallantry! Am I so wrong in my judgment?”

“In most respects: yes. How is my gallantry at fault?”

“Since it was I who called you here, surely you might have joined me at my table.”

Shimrod nodded. “What you say is valid, in the abstract. Still, in the past I have found you unpredictable, and sometimes pungent in your recriminations; it is one of your little quirks. I hesitated to make a public demonstration of our acquaintance and perhaps cause you embarrassment. I therefore waited upon your signal.”

“Good modest self-effacing Shimrod! I was right after all! Your chivalry is irreproachable!”

“Thank you,” said Shimrod.

“Furthermore, I wanted to dine before you told me something to destroy my appetite.”

“Now are you replete?”

“I have dined well, though the venison was somewhat tough, and meanwhile you decided what you wished to tell me.”

Melancthe smiled down at the flower she held in her fingers. “Perhaps I have nothing whatever to tell you.”

“Why then was I summoned by so explicit a signal? Unless at this moment

thieves are ransacking Trilda.”

Melanthe’s smile, as she twirled the flower in her fingers, became vague. “It might be that I merely wanted to be seen in company with the famous Shimrod, to enhance my reputation.”

“Bah! Not a person here knows me, except Hockshank.”

Melanthe looked around the room. “For a fact, no one seems to be noticing. The reason is simple: your modesty.

Tamurello’s dramatic guises are for the most part self-defeating. You are more clever; you conceal yourself in a form which allows you great advantage.”

Shimrod looked blankly across the table.  
“Indeed? How so?”

Melanthe inspected Shimrod through half-closed eyes with her head tilted sidewise. “You simulate the universal man with total conviction! Your hair is hacked short across your face peasant-style, and is even the colour of well-used stable-straw. The features of your face are bony and gaunt, but you relieve their coarseness by a simpleton’s drollery which reassures everyone. You wear what appears to be a peasant’s smock, and as you dine, elbows high, you display the appetite of one who has toiled long hours among the turnips. All these aspects make for a great

advantage, as well you realize! No adversary would ever associate what purports to be a gaunt, blinking loon for the dangerous and debonair Shimrod! It is a cunning disguise.”

“Thank you!” said Shimrod. “Your compliments are hard to come by; I accept them all with pleasure... . Boy! Bring more wine!”

Melancthe smiled down at her flower. “Has Hockshank found you a chamber for the night?”

“He has offered me a bench here in the common room. Something better may still come to light.”

“Who knows?” murmured Melancthe.

The boy brought wine in a gray faience decanter decorated with blue and green birds, and a pair of squat faience goblets. Shimrod poured both goblets full. “Now then: you have called me here; you have characterized me as a boor and a loon; you have distracted me from my work. Was there any other purpose in your signal?”

Melancthe shrugged. Tonight she wore a dark brown robe, in which she seemed childishly slight. “I might have called you because I was lonely.”

Shimrod raised high his eyebrows.

“Among all these quaint folk? They are your familiars and the songsters who join you out on the rocks!”

“Truly, Shimrod, I wanted to see you that I might ask your opinion of my flower.” She displayed the blossom; the petals, black, purple, ice-blue and carmine-red, seemed as fresh now as if the flower had just been plucked.

“Smell! The odor is unique.”

Shimrod sniffed and looked askance at the flower. “Certainly it is vivid, and its petals are nicely shaped. I have never seen another like it.”

“And the perfume?”



“I find it a trifle too heady. I am reminded of ...” Shimrod paused and rubbed his chin.

“Of what?”

“A strange picture came into my mind: a scene of flowers at war and a great carnage. Flowers with green arms and legs lay dead or mortally wounded; others tall in pride and cruelty cut down at those who were doomed, and so smelled the battlefield.”

“That is a complex and subtle way to describe a scent.”

“Perhaps so. Where did you come by the

flower?”

“At the booth of the trader Zuck, who will tell me nothing as to its source.”

Shimrod drank from the goblet. “We have discussed my disguise and your flower; what other topics interest you?”

Melanthe gave her head a rueful shake. “When first we met you lacked all suspicion. Now you dart cynical glances over your wine-cup.”

“I am older,” said Shimrod. “Is that not the ordinary course of life? When I first knew myself as Shimrod, I felt an exuberance I cannot describe! Murgan

despaired of me, and would not so much as hear my voice. I cared nothing; I frolicked like a young goat, and travelled the land with a new adventure at every turning.”

“Aha, tonight your secrets are emerging. Do they include a spouse from this time of rashness, along with a bevy of sons and daughters?”

Shimrod laughed. “There is definitely no spouse. As for children, who knows the truth, if all were sorted out? I enjoyed a vagabond’s life; I was as careless as a bird, and only too susceptible to the charms of winsome maidens, be they fairy, falloy or human. If I fathered

children, how many or how they fare today is unknown to me. Sometimes I wonder but in those days I never gave thought to such things. All is past; tonight here sits Shimrod, sedate and crafty, in his peasant disguise. Meanwhile, how goes your life?"

Melanthe sighed. "Tamurello is back from Mount Khambaste and the air is immediately rife with intrigue and rumor, which might or might not interest you."

"I am willing to listen."

Melanthe studied the flower as if seeing it for the first time. "I pay little

heed. Occasionally I hear a name I recognize; then I turn my head to listen. For instance, are you acquainted with the magician Visbhume?"

"Not by such a name. What of this Visbhume; why is he notable?"

"For nothing in particular. Apparently he was at one time apprentice to a certain Hippolito, now dead."

"I have heard of Hippolito. He lived in the north of Dahaut."

"Visbhume approached Tamurello with some mad scheme, and Tamurello sent him packing." And Melancthe added

primly: “Visbhume lacks all principle.”

“How so?”

“Oh-this way and that. Lacking Tamurello’s support he declared himself ready to serve King Casmir of Lyonesse. They think to attack King Aillas of Troicinet.”

Shimrod tried to feign disinterest. “And so: what are his intentions?”

“There was talk of using the Princess Glyneth in their plans... . You appear to be stunned by this little rumor.”

“Truly? I admit to affection for the

Princess Glyneth. I would do my best to ward her from harm.”

Melanthe leaned back in her chair and thoughtfully sipped wine from her goblet. Presently she spoke, in a soft even voice, though a subtle ear might have detected nuances of mockery and annoyance. “Amazing how chaste little virgins like Glyneth can excite such wild extravagances of gallantry, while other persons of equal worth, perhaps blemished by a goiter or a pock-mark or two, can lie suffering in the ditch, eliciting little if any notice.”

Shimrod uttered a melancholy laugh. “The fact is real! The explanation

derives from daydreams and ideal concepts far more powerful than justice, truth and mercy all combined. But not in the case of Glyneth. She spills over with kindness; and she would never ignore those lying in the ditch. She is always merry; she is clean and fresh as the sunlight; she brings pleasure to the world by her sheer existence.”

Melancthe seemed taken aback by the fervor of Shimrod’s remarks. “In Shimrod she has a dedicated champion. I was unaware of your devotion.”

“I know her well, and I love her as I would my own daughter.”



Melancthe rose to her feet, mouth drooping. “I had forgotten; the subject bores me.”

Shimrod also rose to his feet.

“Melancthe, are you retiring for the night?”

“Yes; the common room grows noisy. You may join me if you like.”

“Lacking all better alternative, I accept.” Shimrod took Melancthe’s arm and the two retired to the apartment behind the Door of the Two Green Lizards.

Shimrod put light to the candles in the candelabra on the table. Melancthe,

standing in the center of the room, fixed the flower into her hair, watching Shimrod all the while. She let fall her brown robe and stood nude in the candlelight. “Shimrod: am I not beautiful?”

“Beyond all doubt; beyond all question! But put aside the flower; it detracts from you.”

Melanthe pouted. “But I like it! Shimrod, come kiss me.”

“Put aside the flower! I find it repellent.”

“As you like.” Melanthe tossed the

flower to the table. “Now will you kiss me?”

“I will do better than that,” said Shimrod, and so passed the first hours of the night.

At midnight, as the two lay pressed close together, Shimrod said: “I have an uneasy feeling that you were about to tell me something more of the wizard Visbhume.”

“Yes, that is so.”

“Then why will you not tell me?”

“Because I feared that you would

become agitated and perform some instant and unnecessary act.”

“What sort of act might that be?”

“There is nothing you can do now; Visbhume has already gone to Watersshade and departed, for one of his private bolt-holes: a place known as Tanjecterly.”

A cold chill came over Shimrod. “And he took Glyneth with him?”

“That is the rumor. But you can do nothing to prevent it.

The deed is done.”

“Why did Visbhume do this?”

“He worked at Casmir’s behest. Also, if Tamurello is to be believed, such projects are dear to Visbhume’s heart.”

“He must know that he has just put a short term to his life,” said Shimrod.

Melancthe held him close. “I like you best when you are like this.”

Shimrod thrust her away. “You should have told me at once, if you meant to tell me at all.”

“Ah Shimrod! You must remember my mixed feelings for you. I am at ease and

even happy with you, but soon I find that I want to hurt you and cause you every conceivable pain.”

“You are lucky that I lack similar yearnings, even though you provoke them.” Shimrod dressed himself.

“It is exactly as I feared,” said Melanthe. “The impractical Shimrod hurries off to Tanjecterly and there rescues his dainty Glyneth.”

“Where is Tanjecterly? How does one get there?”

“The route is detailed in the rarest of all books: one which Visbhume stole from

Hippolito.”

“And the name of the book?”

“Twitten’s Almanac, or some such thing... . Shimrod! Are you truly going?”

The only response was the sound of the door closing behind Shimrod. Melancthe shrugged and presently fell asleep.

In the morning Melancthe went in great anticipation to the booth of Zuck the trader, where she was disappointed anew.

“I have spoken to the falloy,” said Zuck.  
“There will be no more flowers at this

fair; the plants yielded only the single blossom. There will be more in the fall, as the buds are already forming, and the falloy says that you must bring gold, as silver is not enough for wares so heady.”

Melanthe spoke a soft sound under her breath. “Zuck, I will come in the autumn, and you must reserve the blooms for me alone! Is it agreed?”

“So long as you pay in gold.”

“There will be no difficulty here.”

## IV

RETURNING TO TRILDA, Shimrod



went at once to the workroom. In the Pantological Index he discovered a reference to Tanjecterly’

The source of information in regard to Tanjecterfy is derived from, the exceedingly not and somewhat suspect ‘Twitten’s Almanac’. Tanjecterfy is described as one of a set, or cycle, of ten superimposed worlds, which, includes our own. Interconnections are difficult to find and evanescent in nature.

According to Twitten, Tanjecterfy, similar in certain ordinary respects to our world, is notaofy different in others. The inhabitants are said to be various and include even tribes of human-

seeming folk, and others in which the similarity is at Best cursory. The environment of Tanjecterfy is described as noxious, and indeed lethal to those persons who would travel here without making adaptations. Again, Tanjectafy may be no more than one of Twitten's idle fables; his caprices and pranks are well documented elsewhere. On the other hand, the 'Almanac' is said to be a work of great complexity and inner coherence, which would seem to lend the volume credence.

Shimrod tapped the silver bell. A voice said: "Shimrod, you work late."

"I was summoned to a rendezvous by

Melancthe the Witch. I met her at the Laughing Sun and Crying Moon Inn, and I thought surely that she had called to give me news, and so it was, though she took her own time in the telling.

“She mentioned a low sorcerer by the name of Visbhume, formerly apprenticed to Hippolito. Visbhume conferred with Tamurello, who sent him to King Casmir of Lyonesse. Thereafter, according to Melancthe, Visbhume went to Watershade and for reasons not entirely clear kidnapped Glyneth and took her to the place Tanjecterly.

“The Index lists Tanjecterly as a possibly imaginary place, mentioned by

Twitten in his ‘Almanac’.”

“So then: what are your plans?”

“I can only do as Melanthe, and perhaps Tamurello expect. I will go to Watershade; there I hope either to find this is all a mare’s-nest, or is a situation where I can interfere with Visbhume’s plans. Failing this, I must go wherever Visbhume has taken Glyneth, which may mean Tanjecterly itself.”

The cool voice said: “This seems a complicated intrigue. Several motivations are suggested. Like you, I suspect that Tamurello has instructed Melanthe. She had very good success

urging you to leap like a fool into interworld chaos before; she and Tamurello no doubt have theorized that, if the scheme worked so well before, why should it not work again? Clearly they want you to plunge with full bravado into Tanjecterly, whence you will never return: for them a fine feat! They destroy you and cripple me. Under no circumstances are you to venture into Tanjecterly. It is a palpable trap!

“Second: if Visbhume is working at the behest of Casmir, then the object might also be to confuse, distract and harm King Aillas. I have recently sensed, and this confirms, that Tamurello at last has discovered the insolence to ignore my

edicts and I must punish him.”

“All very well,” said Shimrod. “But what of Glyneth?”

“I know nothing about Tanjecterly; it seems that I must make inquiries. In the morning I will tell you my findings; then you must counsel King Aillas. But neither he, nor you, nor the prince Dhrun, may venture the way into Tanjecterly.”

“Then how shall Glyneth be rescued?”

“We will send our agent. Now I must go to study.”

AT SUNSET AILLAS AND DHRUN, on horses sweaty and spent, crossed the moat by the old timber drawbridge and so arrived at Watershade.

Shimrod came out to meet them. Aillas and Dhrun searched his face, hoping to read some trace of cheer. Shimrod gave his head a shake. "I know a few sparse facts, and their indications are worse than ever. I cannot even speculate on what is happening to Glyneth. Come; let us go inside, and I will tell you what I know. At this moment, hysterical haste will avail us nothing; tonight at least we will sit quietly and rest and form plans as best we can."

Aillas said: “You do not infect me with optimism.”

“There is none to be had. Come; Weare has laid out our supper and I will tell you of Tanjecterly.”

Dhrun asked: “Where is Tanjecterly?”

“You shall hear.”

Aillas and Dhrun ate cold beef and bread while Shimrod spoke. “I will start at the starting,” said Shimrod. “Some hundreds of years ago Twitten the Wizard either himself compiled, or obtained from another source, a volume which became known as Twitten’s



Almanac. This same Twitten, for purposes unknown, placed the iron post at a crossroads in the Forest of Tantrevalles, despite legends which state otherwise.

“The almanac, so I learn, describes a cycle of worlds one of which is Tanjecterly.

“Hippolito the Magician owned the almanac, and apparently instructed his apprentice Visbhume in its use; when Hippolito disappeared, presumably to his death, Visbhume made off with the almanac.”

Aillas said: “I know something of this

Visbhume. By all reports he is a strange and unpleasant person, and works in the service of Casmir. He came before to Troicinet, and put assiduous inquiries regarding Dhrun to Dame Ehirme and her family, who seem to have given him hints as to the circumstances of Dhrun's birth, of which Casmir still knows nothing."

"Here may be the basis of Visbhume's acts," said Shimrod. "He has taken Glyneth that he may learn all there is to be known in this regard."

Dhrun groaned. "Let him give us back Glyneth! I will tell him all he wants to know and more!"

Aillas spoke between clenched teeth:  
“Show me the gate into Tanjecterly; if he has laid a rude finger on her, I will break all his bones!”

“Just so,” said Shimrod with a sad smile. “Murgen feels that Tamurello is responsible, and Tamurello hopes that all who love Glyneth most will recklessly hurl themselves into Tanjecterly, and there be lost forever. Murgen has forbidden any such acts.”

“Then what can we do?” demanded Dhrun.

“Nothing, until we receive word from Murgen.”

## VI

IN THE MORNING DHRUN LED THE WAY to the woodcutter's hut deep in the Wild Woods to which his dogs had followed Glyneth's trail. As before, the hut stood alone in a little glade, and appeared to be deserted.

Aillas approached and started to step through the doorway. He was stayed by a sharp cry: "Hold, Aillas! Stand back! As you value your life, do not enter the hut!"

Murgen came forward. Today he seemed a tall erect woodsman with close-cropped white hair. He spoke to Dhrun:

“When you traced Glyneth to this place, did you enter the hut?”

“No, sir. The dogs stopped at the doorway, and acted in a peculiar manner. I looked through the doorway and saw that the hut was empty; the place gave me an eerie feeling and I came away.”

“That was well-considered. See this golden shine around the doorway? It is barely visible in the light. It marks the way into Tanjecterly, and the way is still open. If you wish to bring great rejoicing to the heart of King Casmir, step through the doorway.”

Aillas asked: “May I call out through the doorway?”

“Call away! Your voice can do no harm.”

Aillas stepped close to the doorway and called through the opening: “Glyneth! It is Aillas! Can you hear me?”

Silence was profound; Aillas reluctantly turned away and watched as Murgan scratched an outline in the turf before the hut, in the shape of a square twenty feet on the side. With the most meticulous care he scratched a number of other marks inside the perimeter and then stood back. From his wallet he brought a

small box carved from a single block of red cinnabar and tossed the contents toward the delineated square.

Dense white vapor filled the interior of the square, to dissipate with a sudden soft explosion, leaving behind a structure of gray stone. The single means of ingress was a tall black iron door, adorned with a panel displaying the Tree of Life.

Murgen went to the door, swung it wide, beckoned to the company. “Come!”

Aillas, passing through the portal, felt a puzzling sense of familiarity, as if he had come this way before. Shimrod knew

their location precisely: the entry to the great hall at Swer Smod.

“Come,” said Murgan. “There is reason for haste. The ten places slide and move past each other. Visbhume’s passage seems firm but who knows when it will break. Since we cannot pass through, we need an agent of suitable sort. I have done the needful study; now the synthesis. Come; to my workroom.”

Murgan took the company to a chamber furnished with shelves, cabinets, and tables burdened with unfamiliar machinery. Windows to the east overlooked the foothills of the Teach tac Teach and, beyond, the dark expanse of



Forest Tantrevailles.

Murgen pointed to a bench. “Sit, if you will... . Notice this cabinet. It has cost me large toil and a dozen obligations in unseemly places. Still, what must be, is. The cabinet glows with a green-yellow light; it is in fact the stuff of Tanjecterly. The creature within is a young syaspic feroce from the Dyad Mountains of Tanjecterly. Now he is a mere schematic; when activated he will also manifest the stuff of Tanjecterly and will form the armature of our construction. It has other virtues as well: it is strong, alert, agile and cunning. It is immune to fear and is loyal to the death. Its flaws are the other side of the same coin: it is

savage and becomes a monster of destructive fury when provoked, or sometimes even in the absence of provocation. It is also prone to unpredictable frivolities which propel its kind on expeditions of ten thousand miles that they may dine on a particular fruit. This is the basis of our agent.”

Aillas eyed the creature dubiously. It stood a few inches over six feet tall and displayed a rudely man-like form, with a heavy head resting on massive shoulders, long arms with taloned hands and prongs growing from the knuckles. A black pelt covered its scalp, a strip down its back and about the pelvic region. Its features were heavy and

crude, with a low forehead, a short nose and ropy mouth; tawny-gold eyes looked through slits between ridges of cartilage.

Murgen spoke again: "This is not the beast itself, which would be of no use to us, but its constructive principles, which define its nature. Last night I sought across a hundred worlds and a million years of time. I still am not content but in so short a time I can discover none better." He closed the cabinet on the syaspic feroce, and opened another to reveal the simulacrum of a strong young man wearing leather trousers buckled at the belt. "This creature appears to our eyes as a man because our brains make such an interpretation; it is unnecessary

to think differently. He lives among the far moons of Achernar, and he is accustomed to the most extreme outrages of terror and the hourly proximity of death. He survives because he is ruthless and intelligent; his name is Kul the Killer. To our eyes and our brains he seems a handsome clean-limbed young man of fine physique, and we will make use of this matrix when we join him to the feroce, as we do now.”

Murgen joined the cabinets, then, at a table, took what appeared to be a sheet of paper cut into patterns and laid it on , another similar set of patterns. He worked for a moment with patterns, cabinets and machinery. “Now!” said

Murgen. “The synthesis is done. We shall call the product ‘Kul’. Let us observe him.”

Murgen opened the cabinet door, to reveal a new being with attributes of both its constituent beings. The head rode on a short heavy neck; the face was less brutally modeled; the arms, hands, legs and feet were more distinctly human. Kul wore his short leather trousers, while the pelt of black hair now covered only the scalp, the neck and part of the back.

Murgen said: “Kul is not yet alive, and needs still another component: direction, full intelligence, and sympathetic

junction with our own humanity. Any of you three can supply these qualities; each of you, in his own way, loves Glyneth. Shimrod, I deem you the least suitable. Dhrun, you would gladly give your life for Glyneth; but the quality I seek I find in Aillas.”

“Whatever you need, I will give it.”

Murgen looked at Aillas. “It will mean discomfort and weakness, for you must invest the strength of your spirit and a goodly quantity of your red human blood in this creature. Kul will have no knowledge of you, but his human virtues, if such words apply, will be yours.”

Murgen nodded. “Shimrod, Dhrun: wait in the hall.”

Dhrun and Shimrod departed the workroom. An hour passed. Murgen appeared. “I have sent Aillas to Watersshade. He gave more of himself than I expected and he is weak. Let him rest; in a week or so he will be himself.”

“And what of the creature Kul?”

“I have instructed him, and already he has fared through the hole into Tanjecterly. Come; let us learn what news he sends back.”

The three returned through the foyer to

the glade in the Wild Woods. Murgan dissolved the gray stone structure; the three approached the woodcutter's hut.

A black glass bottle flew through the doorway and landed at their feet.

Murgan extracted a message:

I find neither Gfynah nor Visbhume close at hand. I have questioned one who watched all that happened. Glyneth took flightt from Visbhume who went in pursuit. The trail is plain. I will follow.



# Chapter 15

## I

ON A BRIGHT SUMMER'S MORNING Glyneth rose with the sun. She washed her face, and combed out her hair, which had grown to hang in loose dark golden curls somewhat past her ears. It was beautiful hair, so she had been told: full of glints and gleams, but perhaps a trifle longer than truly convenient, since now the wind could blow it into a tousle, so that it needed attention to keep it neat. To cut, or not to cut? Glyneth pondered carefully. Gallants of the court had assured her

how nicely her hair set off the contours of her face. Still, the one person whose opinion truly mattered to her never seemed to notice whether her hair was long or short.

“Ah ha,” said Glyneth to herself. “We will soon put a stop to that kind of nonsense, since now I think I know what to do.”

On this bright morning she made a breakfast of porridge, with a boiled egg and a glass of fresh milk, and the whole day lay ahead of her. On the morrow, Dhrun would be arriving for the summer; today was her last day of solitude.

Glyneth considered riding her horse into the village, but only yesterday, when she rode to visit her friend Lady Alicia, at Black Oak Manor, a peculiar man in a pony cart had signaled her to a halt and had put the most surprising questions.

Glyneth had politely acknowledged her identity. Yes, she knew Prince Dhrun very well; no one knew him better. Was it true then that Dhrun had lived for a period in a fairy shee? At this point Glyneth had excused herself from further conversation. "I cannot assert this of my own personal knowledge, sir. Why not put your questions to King Aillas at the court if you are truly interested? There you would learn which facts are real and

which are idle speculation.”

“That is good advice! Today is a fine day for riding. How far do you go?”

“I ride to visit my friends,” said Glyneth.  
“Good day to you, sir!”

On this morning Glyneth decided that she did care to risk another encounter with the odd gentleman-it was almost as if he had been waiting for her to ride past-and so she decided to wander in the woods.

She took up her berry basket, kissed Dame Flora, and promised to be home in time to eat the berries she planned to pick for her lunch. So saying, she set off

into the Wild Woods.

Today the forest was at its best. The foliage glowed a thousand shades of green in the sunlight, and a breeze from the lake made a pleasant murmur as it passed.

Glyneth knew a place where wild strawberries grew in abundance, and never seemed to fail, but as she walked along the trail her attention was attracted by the most beautiful butterfly she had ever seen. It floated before her, on wings of orange, black and red fully six inches across, and of a most unusual shape. Glyneth increased her pace hoping that it would settle, that she might examine it at

her leisure, but it flew even faster, and eventually, entering a glade, it flew into a woodcutter's hut.

Most odd, thought Glyneth. What a foolish butterfly! She looked through the door, and seemed to notice an odd greenish-yellow glow, but paid it no heed. She stepped into the hut, and looked all around, but the butterfly was gone. On an old table across the room lay a scrap of parchment. Glyneth read:

You may be surprised but all is well, and all will be well. Your good friend Sir Visftfuune will help you and is about to bring you a great happiness. Once again Feel no fear. Put all trust in noble

Sir Visbhune, and do his bidding.

Most strange, thought Glyneth. Why should she be surprised? And put her trust in Visbhune and do his bidding? Not likely! Still, undeniably, something strange was in the air! First the butterfly, then the peculiar light which now pervaded the room. Magic hung in the air! Glyneth had known a surfeit of magic and wanted no more of it. She turned to the door; never mind the butterfly, and the berries; she wanted only to be safe home at Watershade as quickly as possible.

She stepped from the hut, but where was the forest? She looked out on a strange

landscape; where could she be?

Two suns hung at the zenith of a heather-gray sky, lazily circling each other: one green, the other lemon-yellow. Short blue grass grew along a hillside sloping down to a slow gentle river, which flowed from right to left and out on a wide flat plain. Where the river met the horizon an object like a black moon hung in the sky, and the very look of the object caused Glyneth a spasm of unreasonable fear, even horror. Feeling ever more frightened, Glyneth turned away to look elsewhere.

Across the river, low hills and dales rolled in a majestic rhythmic succession,



finally blending together. A range of mountains, black and yellow-brown, slanted down from the far left, to disappear over the horizon. Closer at hand, along the banks of the river, grew trees with nearly spherical crowns, dark red or blue or blue-green. At the riverside a short man hunched over to dig in the mud with a spade. He wore a dark brown smock, and a widebrimmed brown hat concealed his features. A hundred yards along the shore a boat swung at a rude dock.

Scanning the countryside, Glyneth could not help but marvel at the brightness and clarity of the colours. They were not the colours of Earth! Where had she

wandered? ... From behind her came the sound of a small polite cough. Glyneth whirled around. On a bench beside the hut sat the strange man who had spoken to her on the previous day. She stared at him in mingled wonder and consternation.

Visbhume rose to his feet and bowed. He wore neither cloak nor cape, only a voluminous shirt of black silk with loose overlong sleeves almost to his finger tips; the collar was tied with a flowing cravat of patterned black and red silk. His trousers were also voluminous black silk, hanging to the ground and barely showing long narrow black slippers.

“Have we not met before?” asked Visbhume in the most refined of accents.

“We spoke on the road yesterday,” said Glyneth. Then, her voice trembling in hope, she asked, “Can you please tell me the way back to the forest? I am wanted home for my lunch.”

“Aha ha hah!” said Visbhume. “It must be somewhere about.”

“So I should think but I see it nowhere... . Why are you here?”

“At the moment, I stand admiring the splendid scenery of Tanjecterly. You are Glyneth, I believe. If I may say so, your

person in no small measure enhances the beauty of these already charming vistas.”

Glyneth frowned and pursed her lips but could think of nothing to say which did not seem ungracious.

Visbhume went on, as before using a voice of refinement and gentility. “You may know me as Sir Visbhume. I am a knight of excellent degree, versed in all the phases of chivalry, and in all the courtly arts now the rage of Aquitania. You will derive enormous benefit from my protection and instruction.”

“That is kind of you, sir,” said Glyneth. “I hope that you will indeed instruct me

how to return to the forest. I must be home to Watershade within the hour; otherwise Dame Flora will worry greatly.”

“That is a vain hope,” said Visbhume grandly. “Dame Flora must find a means to assuage her concern. The gate functions in only one direction, and we must discover the corresponding crevice of return.”

Glyneth searched dubiously all around. “How is that crevice found? If you tell me, I will search it out.”

“There is no hurry,” said Visbhume with a trace of asperity in his voice. “I regard

this as a delightful occasion, with none to trouble us or say us nay, as is so often the case! We shall relax at ease and each take pleasure in the other's capabilities. I am accomplished in a dozen ways; you will clap your hands in happiness for your luck."

Glyneth, darting one quick sideglance at Visbhume, remained thoughtfully silent... Visbhume was possibly unworldly. Cautiously she suggested: "You do not seem alarmed by this strange place! Would you not prefer to be at home with your family?"

"Ah, but I have no family! I am a wandering minstrel; I know music of

palpable energies, music to cause your blood to pump and your feet to tap!” Visbhume pulled a small fiddle from his wallet and using an inordinately long bow, played a fine jig and danced as well: kicking and jerking, raising high his elbows, producing all the while his strident, if sprightly, music.

At last, with eyes glowing, he came to a halt. “Why are you not dancing?”

“In truth, Sir Visbhume, I worry about finding my way home. Please, can you help me?”

“We shall see, we shall see,” said Visbhume airily. “Come sit beside me

and tell me an item or two of information.”

“Sir, let me conduct you to Watershade, where we may talk at leisure.”

Visbhume held up his hand. “No, no! I know all there is to be known of clever young ladies who say ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’ and ‘no’ when they mean ‘Visbhume, please and by all means!’ I wish to talk here, where candor will make you my absolute favorite, and will not that be a pleasant treat? Come now, sit; I enjoy the sense of your delectable presence!”

“Sir Visbhume, I prefer to stand. Tell me



what you wish to know.”

“I am curious as to Prince Dhrun and his early youth. It would seem that he is quite old in years for so young a father,”

“Sir, the folk concerned might not wish me to gossip at wholesale with strangers.”

“But I am not a stranger! I am Visbhume, and much attracted by your fresh young beauty! Here on Tanjecterly there are none to cavil and none to glare and none to cry out ‘impudicity!’ We can indulge ourselves in the most daring of intimacies... . But ah, I have perhaps hinted at too much! Think only of my

search for truth! I need but a few facts to ease my curiosity. Tell me, my dear! Tell me, do!”

Glyneth tried to seem casual. “Better that we return to Watershade, you and I! There you may put questions to Dhrun himself, and he will surely give you a gracious response. You will gain my good opinion, and I will know no guilt.”

Visbhume chuckled. “Guilt, my dear? Never! Come closer to me; I would caress your glossy hair, with perhaps a kiss for your reward.”

Glyneth drew back a step. Visbhume’s evident intent was bad news indeed,

since, if he misused her, he would not dare liberate her for fear that she would carry tales. In such a case her only protection lay in denying him the information he sought.

Visbhume watched her sidelong, smiling like a fox, as if he were able to read the flow of her thoughts. He said: "Glyneth, I am a person who dances to a merry tune! Still, sometimes I must, by necessity and rightness, tread to a more portentous strain. I dislike excesses where events go wildly awry and affectionate trust is forever shattered. Do you apprehend my meaning?"

"You want me to obey you, and you

promise me harm if I will not.”

Visbhume chuckled. “That is blunt and direct; the music to these words is not pretty. Still-”

“Sir Visbhume, I care not a twig for your music. I must also tell you that unless you in all courtesy allow me to leave this place, you will answer to King Aillas, and this is as sure as the sun rises and sets.”

“King Aillas? Oh la! The suns of Tanjecterly neither rise nor set; they curvet in graceful rounds about the sky. Now then! The fabric of our love is not yet rent! Tell me what I wish to know-

after all, it is no great thing-or I must compel you to a sweet obedience. I will show you, so that you will know my power. Watch!”

Visbhume went to a nearby hedge and plucked a flower of twenty pink and white petals. “See this bloom? Is it not dainty and innocent? See how I do.”

Visbhume pushed his long thin white fingers from the black sleeves and, petal by petal, pulled the flower apart, with each petal smiling up at Glyneth, who watched with dread growing large in her mind.

Visbhume tossed away the dead flower. “By this means I have taken a richness

into my soul. But it is only a taste, when I would dine full. Watch!”

Visbhume rummaged through his wallet and found a little silver whistle. Going once more to the hedge, he blew on the pipe. Glyneth stared to where a sheath sewed to the side of the wallet showed the haft of a little stiletto. She moved a step toward the wallet, but Visbhume had turned so that her movements were under his gaze.

A bird with a blue-crested head flew to the hedge to hear Visbhume’s piping. With nimble white fingers Visbhume played flourishes, trills and wild little arpeggios, and the bird cocked its head

askance to hear such mad and wonderful notes.

Glyneth, through fairy magic, had been gifted with the language of all things, and she cried out to the bird: “Fly! He means you harm!”

The bird chirped uneasily, but Visbhume had seized it, and carried it back to the bench. “Now, my dear, watch! And remember, everything I do has its reason.”

While Glyneth watched aghast, Visbhume performed atrocious deeds upon the bird, and finally let the tattered thing drop to the ground. He wiped his

fingers fastidiously upon a tuft of grass, and smiled at Glyneth. "Such are the ways in which my blood is stirred, and a sweet savor is added to our knowledge of one another. So come closer, sweet Glyneth, I am ready to caress your warm person."

Glyneth took a deep breath and twisted her face into the caricature of a smile. Slowly she came toward Visbhume, who crowed in delight. "Ah, sweet, sweet, sweet! You come like a dear maiden should!" He reached out his arms; Glyneth shoved him smartly on the narrow chest and sent him stumbling backward, mouth pursed in a purple O of astonishment. Glyneth seized the wallet,



and drew the stiletto. As Visbhume staggered back toward her she struck out. Her arm was deflected; the stiletto plunged through Visbhume's left cheek, across his mouth and out his right cheek. The stiletto, of magic properties, could not be withdrawn save by the hand which had thrust it. Visbhume gave a crazy chortling cry of pain and whirled in a circle; Glyneth seized his wallet and ran at full speed down the slope to the river. A hundred yards downstream she spied the dock. Visbhume came bounding after her, the stiletto yet protruding from his cheek.

Glyneth ran to the dock and jumped into the boat. The fisherman who dug in the

mud along the shore cried out in anger:  
“Halt! Do not molest my boat! Away  
with you and your tricks!”

The language was strange, but her sleight  
of tongues allowed Glyneth complete  
understanding; nevertheless, she cast off  
the line and pushed out into the river just  
as Visbhume came running out on the  
dock. He stood waving his arms and  
trying to call, but the stiletto impeded his  
tongue, and his words were barely  
comprehensible: “... my wallet! ...  
Glyneth! Come back; you do not know  
what you do! ... the holes to our world,  
we will never return!”

Glyneth looked for oars, but found none.

The boat was caught in the current and swept off downstream, with Visbhume bounding along the bank, uttering strangled orders and pleas, until he was halted by the influx of a second river, so that he was obliged to stop and watch Glyneth, in her boat, float beyond his reach of vision, along with his wallet.

Presently Visbhume came upon a ferry operated by a pair of lumpish men, who demanded coin before they would convey him across the river. Visbhume, lacking coin, was compelled to surrender the silver buckle from his shoe for the passage.

At the ferry terminus Visbhume

discovered a blacksmith shop. Upon payment of the remaining buckle, the smith sawed the handle from the shaft; then, while Visbhume shrieked in pain, he seized the tip with a pincers and pulled the blade out through Visbhume's right cheek.

From a pocket in his voluminous sleeve, Visbhume brought a round white box. He removed the top and shook out a tablet of waxy yellow balm. With sighs and exclamations of gratification he rubbed the balm on his wounds, easing his pain and healing the cuts. He returned balm into box and box into the pocket in his sleeve; the pieces of stiletto he dropped into a pocket in the side of his trousers,

and once more set off in pursuit of Glyneth.

At length Visbhume reached the shore of the main river. The surface of the water lay blank; the boat had drifted far out of sight.

## II

THE BOAT FLOATED ALONG THE RIVER, with the banks sliding by at either side. Glyneth sat rigidly fearful that somehow the boat might rock and pitch her into the dark deep water, and Glyneth thought that she would not like to explore the depths of this river. She looked sadly over her shoulder; with

every instant she floated farther from the hut and passage back the way she had come. She told herself: “My friends will help me!” No matter what the circumstances, she must cling to this conviction-because she knew it was true.

Another dismal idea: what if she became hungry and thirsty? Dare she eat and drink the substances of Tanjecterly? More than likely they would poison her. In her mind's-eye she saw herself eating a morsel of fruit, and instantly choking, then turning black and swelling into a disgusting parody of herself.

“I must stop thinking such things!” she

told herself resolutely. “Aillas will help me as soon as he finds that I am lost, and Shimrod as well, and of course my dear Dhrun... . The sooner the better, for this is a dreadful place!”

Spherical trees with foliage of red and blue and blue-black lined the banks. On several occasions Glyneth saw beasts at the river’s edge: a white bull with the head of an insect and spikes along his back; a spindly stilt-man fifteen feet tall with a narrow neck and a sharp face adapted to looking into foliage for nuts and fruit.

Glyneth explored the contents of the wallet. She found a book bound in

leather entitled Twitten's Almanac, evidently newly copied from an older work. She found a small bottle of wine and a little box containing a hunch of bread and a slab of cheese. Those were Visbhume's rations, and Glyneth surmised that both bottle and case were magically refilled after use. She noticed other articles whose utility was not so clear, including a half-dozen small glass bulbs swarming inside with insects.

Glyneth, in the absence of Visbhume, began to feel less desperate. Sooner or later her friends would find her, and bring her home; of this she felt sure... . Why should Visbhume so insistently inquire upon the circumstances of



Dhrun's birth? He could only be acting in the interests of King Casmir, and hence disclosure of the knowledge most probably would not be to the advantage of Dhrun.

The boat drifted into marshy shallows. Glyneth reached into the water and secured a floating branch, which she used to pole herself to the shore. She climbed the bank and searched upriver, but discovered no sign of Visbhume. She turned to look downriver and discovered a line of stony crags descending from a high ridge, at last to thrust into the water. Glyneth eyed these crags with distrust, speculating that they might be the haunt of ferocious beasts. The boat and the

squat person in the wide brown hat, digging in the mud, indicated the existence of a human population-but where? And what sort of human beings?

Glyneth stood on the shore, dubiously considering the landscape: a woeful figure in a pretty blue frock.

Conceivably all the best magic of Shimrod might not be able to find her, and she would spend all the days of her life under the green and yellow suns of Tanjecterly-unless Visbhume came upon her and hypnotized her with his silver pipe.

She blinked away her tears. As her first urgency she must find a refuge secure

from Visbhume.

The crags which came down to the river intrigued her. If she climbed to the near ridge she could overlook a great sweep of country and perhaps discover a human settlement. The idea was not without its dreary possibilities! Strangers were not everywhere accorded kind hospitality, not even among the lands of Earth.

So Glyneth hesitated and wondered how best to survive. The boat offered a measure of security and she was reluctant to leave it behind.

Her indecision was suddenly vacated. From the water rose a sinewy member,

as wide as her own waist, ending with a wedge-shaped head, a single green eye and a great fanged mouth. The eye fixed upon her; the mouth gaped wide, showing a dark red interior; the head lunged forward, but Glyneth had already jumped back.

The head and neck slowly subsided into the river. Shuddering, Glyneth backed away from the boat, which no longer seemed a source of security... . Well, then: up to the ridge.

She broke away twigs from her branch, so that it might be used as a club, or a staff, or a makeshift lance. Throwing the strap to Visbhume's wallet over her

shoulder, she set out as bravely as possible downstream along the riverbank toward the crags.

Without incident she arrived at the base of the crags and climbed the first rise of ground. Here she paused to catch her breath and, looking back the way she had come, with dismay thought to see a far bounding black form: almost certainly Visbhume.

The rocks were close at hand, where she could possibly find a hiding place. She climbed up a slope among hummocks of curiously convoluted stones. ... As she passed among them, they abruptly uncoiled and jerked erect.

Glyneth gasped in terror; she was surrounded by tall thin creatures gray as stone, with tall pointed heads. Eyes like disks of black glass and long leathery nasal flaps produced an effect of droll dejection, by no means reassuring, especially when one of the group dropped a cord over Glyneth's neck and led her away at a scuttling trot along a trail through the rocks.

Ten minutes later the group came out upon a flat area with crags rising steep at the back. The goblin-eels thrust Glyneth into a pen also occupied by a rotund six-legged creature with a dull pink body surmounted by an object like an enormous orange polyp, fringed by a

hundred eyes growing on stalks. The eyes veered around to peer at Glyneth, who was now in a state beyond terror, with her emotions anaesthetized. ...

Unreal. She closed her eyes and opened them again. Nothing had changed.

The walls of the pen were woven of branches, in a rude and untidy style.

Glyneth stealthily tested the tightness of the weave and decided that without too much effort she could open a hole large enough to permit her passage. She watched the goblin-eels for a moment, wondering what might be the best time to attempt an escape. At the moment the group stood assembled around a pit in the stone, with an opening about four feet

in diameter, from which exuded wisps of vapor, or steam.

Several of the goblin-eels stirred the substance in the pit with longhandled paddles. Occasionally one or another touched the stuff on the paddles and tasted it with the nice judgment of connoisseurs. Conversing in whispers, they arrived at a consensus. Several entered the pen and deftly chopped two legs from the pink beast. Ignoring its squeals of pain as it hobbled to the side of the pen the goblin-eels dropped the legs into the pit. Others tossed a bale of vegetation into the steaming vent. A black shrimplike creature, which roared and bellowed and strove mightily



against its bonds, was also dragged to the opening and thrown in. Its cries reached a crescendo of roaring, then subsided into plaintive gurgling, dwindled and went silent.

Eyes doleful and droll were now turned toward Glyneth, and tears at last coursed down her cheeks. “How dreadful and dreary that I must die in this vile pit, when I do not want to do so, not in the least!”

A shrill wild sound came from the trail: the fluting and warbling of Visbhume’s silver whistle. The goblin-eels became still, then turned and gave signals of perturbation.

Visbhume appeared, marching smartly to the meter of his music, with an occasional caper of sheer extravagance, when he struck some phrase he considered particularly felicitous.

The goblin-eels began shaking and jerking, as if impelled despite all inclination, and began to hop up and down, in place, while Visbhume played fiery jigs and fare-thee-wells. At last he halted, and cried out in a reedy voice a language Glyneth knew to be that of the goblin-eels: “Who is master here, lord of the irresistible tap-tap-a-tapping?”

All whispered: “It is you, it is you! The Progressive Eels are your minions! Put

down your fearful weapon; must we hop and jump to exhaustion?”

“I will show you my mercy, but first, one last little quickstep, for your health’s sake, and so that you remember me the better!”

“Spare us!” cried those who had termed themselves the Progressive Eels.

“Come; taste the good slime of our pit!”  
And: “Put away your magic; eat slime!”

Glyneth had been thrusting at the weave of the pen; she created a hole and squeezed through. “Now! Away, be away! Run, run, run!”

Visbhume pointed: “I will desist, and I will take away with me that creature who even now thinks to escape the pen. Seize her, and bring her to me.”

The Progressive Eels leapt to surround Glyneth, and one seized her hair. A heavy stone, larger than a pair of clenched fists, hissed down to strike the Progressive Eel’s face and crush it to instant pulp.

Stones rattled down the mountainside; Glyneth jerked around in a state close to hysteria; she was not soothed by the silhouette of what appeared to be a monstrous half-human beast, black against the lavender sky. The creature

stood a moment, appraising the scene below, then lunged down the rocks with what seemed a total contempt for gravity: bounding, running, sliding, and at last leaping into the midst of the Progressive Eels. It snatched a sword from the scabbard at its leather belt, and with furious zeal set about hacking and chopping. Glyneth shrank back, appalled by the frightful sounds which rose from the combat. Heads with eyes wide in blank surprise rolled along the ground; torsos half-severed fell down, to crawl about with foolish kicks, usually to tumble into the pit.

Hissing and sighing, the Progressive Eels ran off into the rocks, despite

Visbhume's raging commands. At last he blew a great blast on his pipe which brought the eels to a sudden halt.

Visbhume screamed: "Stand fast! Attack this footling beast, with full force, from all directions! It will cringe before your onslaught!"

The Progressive Eels considered the scene of carnage with large blank eyes. Visbhume exhorted them again: "Strike great blows! Hurl stones and hurtful objects, or even nauseous refuse! Take up spears; stab the thing through and through!"

Certain of the eels heeded the

instructions and picked up rocks to throw, but Visbhume's wrath was not yet appeased. He cried: "Attack! Capture! Marshal the battle-worms! To action, all!"

The man-beast wiped its sword on a corpse and showed Glyneth a grimace of drawn lips and white teeth somewhat difficult to interpret. Shrinking back, she stumbled and started to slide into the pit, but the creature seized her arm and pulled her to safety. Glyneth stared wildly around the landscape, seeking an easy route away from this dreadful place; from the corner of her eye she glimpsed the downward trajectory of a great stone. She lurched aside, and the

stone crashed to the surface where she had stood. Another stone slanted down to strike the man-beast's shoulder; he spun around roaring in rage, but chose not to attack. He slung Glyneth over his shoulder and bounded away up the mountainside.

Visbhume set up an instant scream of indignation. "You are taking my wallet, my personal property! Drop it at once! Theft is a crime! The wallet is mine alone, with my valuable things!"

Glyneth only clutched the wallet more closely, and was whisked up the slope at a speed which made her dizzy.



The creature at last halted and swung Glyneth to the ground.

Glyneth prepared to be devoured or used in some unthinkable fashion, but the creature went to look back the way they had come. It turned around, almost casual in its conduct, showing no signal of menace, and Glyneth drew a deep breath. She ordered her clothes which had become disarranged, then stood hugging Visbhume's wallet in her arms, wondering woefully how the creature meant to deal with her.

The man-beast made sounds, straining as if it found its larynx a new and unfamiliar tool. Glyneth listened intently;

if it meant to harm her, why should it labor to make her understand? Suddenly Glyneth saw that it intended reassurance; fear left her and despite all efforts at self-control, she began to cry.

The creature continued to make sounds, and began to approach intelligibility. Glyneth, trying to listen, forgot her tears. She prompted him: "Speak slowly! .... Say it once again."

Using a voice thick and slurred, he began to form understandable words. "I will help you. ... Do not be afraid."

Glyneth asked tremulously: "Did someone send you to elp me?"

“A man with white hair sent me. His name is Murgan. I am Kul! Murgan instructed me in what I must do.”

With dawning hope Glyneth asked: “And what is that?”

“I must take you to where you came into this place, as fast as I can. There is little time, since I had to come so far to find you. We are already here too long.”

Glyneth asked with new foreboding: “And what if we are too late?”

“I will tell you then.” Kul went to look down the slope.

“We must go! The rock-worms are coming with long-point spears to draw my blood. A man in black gives them orders!”

“That is Visbhume. He is a magician, and I took his wallet, which has made him angry.”

“I will kill him presently. Can you walk, or shall I carry you?”

“I can walk very nicely, thank you,” said Glyneth.

“It is not dignified to ride over your shoulder with my bottom in the air.”

“Let us see how fast you can run with dignity.” They climbed the slope until Glyneth began to pant, whereupon Kul threw her over his shoulder once again and bounded up the rocks. Looking backwards, Glyneth could see only space and far downward perspectives; Kul seemed to ignore gravity and equilibrium, and Glyneth finally closed her eyes.

Arriving at the ridge, he set her down. “Now, if we go yonder, behind that forest, we will come down upon the little house. I believe that an hour or two still remain to us, before the gate closes. If all is proper, you will soon be home.”

Glyneth looked at Kul sidelong. “And what of you?”

Kul seemed puzzled. “I have not been told.” “Do you have a home here, or friends?”

“No.”

“That seems strange!”

“Come,” said Kul. “Time is short.”

The two ran along the ridge, with Kul ever more urgent for speed, and when Glyneth could run no further, he again lifted her and carried her, bounding at a slant down the slope. Finally, at a place

behind the forest, he set her down.  
“Come now; let us see how the land  
lays.”

They went under the balls of dark blue  
and plum-red foliage and looked across  
the sward. The hut stood at a distance of  
a hundred yards. Along the riverbank  
came Visbhume riding a great black  
eight-legged beast, flat as a plank across  
its dorsal surface, with a complicated  
tangle of horn, flexible eye-stalks,  
feeding tubes for a head and a wide flat  
back twenty feet long, where Visbhume  
rode in fine style on the cushioned top  
bench of a white howdah. Behind came a  
band of twenty Progressive Eels  
carrying spears, along with a dozen

other creatures wearing armour of a black metallic substance and tall conical helmets which connected directly to their epaulettes. These goblin-knights carried maces and lances and marched on heavy short legs.

Kul said: "Listen carefully, because time is short. I will go to the far end of the forest and show myself. If they march to attack me, you run to the hut. At the door you will notice a rim of golden light. Stop and listen. If you hear nothing, the way is safe; you may pass through. If you hear harsh sounds or any sounds whatever, do not venture yourself; the hole closing and you will be chopped into a thousand motes, this all clear?"



“Yes, but what of you?”

“Have no fears for me. Quickly now; be ready!”

Glyneth cried out: “Kul! Should I wait for you?”

Kul made an urgent gesture. “No!” He lunged off through the forest.

A few moments later Glyneth heard Visbhume’s shrill outcry: “There stands the beast! To the attack! Pierce both with long-points and lances; break him with your maces! Strike with all force and accurate direction! Cut the horrid creature into minute parcels; let his red

blood spurt and run! attention all! Do not strike or pierce the maiden!”

The black goblin-knights ran heavily forward, with the progressive Eels skipping to the side, while Visbhume rode well to the rear.

Glyneth waited as long as she dared, then, choosing her path, darted out of the forest.

Visbhume saw her instantly, and swinging about his long steed he sent it cantering across the sward to intercept her. Behind ran the Progressive Eels, hissing and whispering. Glyneth stopped short; she could never reach the hut in

time. She retreated to the forest.

Visbhume called out: “Halt! Would you return to Watershade? Stand then, and hear me!”

Glyneth paused uncertainly. Visbhume brought his steed lumbering about in a grand curve, and halted directly between Glyneth and the hut. “Glyneth, make response! What will you say to me?”

Glyneth called out: “I want to go back to Watershade!”

“Just so! Then you must tell me what I want to know!”

Glyneth screwed up her face in sick

indecision. Both Dhrun and Aillas would wish her to tell all she knew, if thereby she could save herself. But would Visbhume stand by his terms?

Shee knew very well that he would not do so. Certain of the Progressives eels were crouching and slinking toward her, thinking to make a sudden leap so as to catch her. She backed toward the forest. On sudden inspiration she halted. Reaching into Visbhume's wallet, she brought out one of the glass eggs full of insects; this she hurled into the midst of the Progressive Eels.

For a moment they stood immobile, staring with disk-eyes glazed over with

consternation; then, letting fall their long-pointed spears they lurched hissing and singing across the sward, dropping from time to time to roll and flail arms and legs in the air. Some plunged into the river and were seen no more; others wallowed in the mud along the shore, and crawled at best speed downstream.

Visbhume cried out: “Glyneth, the minutes fly! I will be safe, since my way is mysterious, but you will be lost forever!”

Glyneth called out in her most cajoling voice: “Visbhume let me go back to Watershade; do! And I will thank you, even though you brought me here; and

King Aillas himself will answer your questions.”

“Ha ha! Do I seem such a fool? King Aillas will have me quickly hanged! Do you quibble with me while the precious minutes flow by? I see the portal; it is still open, but already the golden rim is starting to fade! Tell me now!”

“Let me go first!”

Visbhume screamed in rage. “I make the conditions! Tell me now, or I go through the portal and leave you to the vile Progressives!”

Kul suddenly burst from the forest, and

bounded toward Visbhume, who cried out in alarm and put his steed into posture of defense, with a pair of coiled tentacles snapping out toward Kul.

Kul picked up one of the long-point spears and came forward, circling and feinting with spear poised to throw, always Visbhume protected himself behind the high-reared neck, and now from the forest came the goblin-knights.

Visbhume began to make a wailing outcry.

“The time is short! Leave me be, that I may return to Earth! How dare you molest me so! Knights, kill me this beast,

and quickly! The rim is fading; must I abide on Tanjecterly?"

Kul shouted: "Glyneth! Through the gate!"

Glyneth sidled around Kul and the eight-legged carpet beast, and made a new dash for the hut. She stopped short. The knights had come to attack Kul with maces on high. They chopped, but he slid away and plunged into their midst. Glyneth could see only a welter of movement, and then knights submerged Kul under sheer weight of numbers.

Glyneth, crying out in anguish, seized up a lance; running forward, she stabbed



one of the knights; a heavy mailed leg kicked her in the stomach and sent her toppling backward. Then, as she watched, knights seemed to explode up and out as Kul thrust up from among them. With a mace in his hand, he smashed heads and sent knights reeling. Taking note of Glyneth, he shouted: "Go to the hut! Escape while you can!"

Glyneth cried out desperately: "I cannot leave you to fight lone!"

Kul groaned in frustration. "Must I be killed for nothing? Save yourself; at least do this for me!"

To Glyneth's horror a black knight

reared high; it swung up its' mace and with full power and brought it down upon Kul, who slid to the side to avoid the blow, but fell once again to the sward. Sobbing in despair Glyneth turned and ran for the hut, find Visbhume in front of her, running on long prancing pointed-toe strides, his anxiety now only to extricate himself from Tanjecterly.

Visbhume arrived at the hut with Glyneth close behind, "Visbhume gave a croak of despair and stopped short. "Ah, sorrow, and grief piled on sorrow! The gold is gone! The gate is closed!"

Glyneth likewise came to a shocked standstill. The gold around the door-

opening had faded completely, leaving weathered wood.

Slowly Visbhume turned upon Glyneth, his eyes yellow.

Glyneth shrank back. Visbhume spoke in a voice glottal with passion; “Now I must pronounce justice! By your deed I am trapped here on Tanjecterly, to bide a long and uncertain time! The blame is yours and so shall be the punishment! Prepare yourself for events both bitter and sweet, and of long duration!”

With face contorted he lurched forward. Glyneth dodged aside, but Visbhume held his arms wide with thin fingers

outspread. Glyneth threw a despairing glance over her shoulder, but discovered only a field of corpses. In that case, she would throw herself in the river....

Above Visbhume loomed a shadow. Kul, with blood streaming from a dozen wounds, seized Visbhume by the neck, lifted him high and threw him the ground, where Visbhume lay whimpering and writhing. Kul stepped forward with his sword, but Glyneth cried out:

“No! We need to learn from him!”

Kul slumped to sit upon the steps of the hut. Glyneth went him. “You are wounded; you drip blood! I have no way to care for you!”

Kul gave his head a dreary shake. “Do not concern yourself.”

Glyneth spoke to Visbhume. “What medicines and balms are in this wallet?”

“None!”

Glyneth looked at him closely. “How did you cure wounds where I stabbed you?”

Visbhume said thinly: “I carry only stuffs for my personal use! Give me now my wallet, as I will need it.”

“Visbhume: how did you heal your cheek?”

“No matter!” said Visbhume angrily.  
“That is my privage affair.”

With an effort Glyneth took up Kul’s sword. “Visbhume tell me now, or I will cut off your hand and watch to see how you deal with your hurt!” She raised the sword in the air. Visbhume looking up startled into the pale clenched face, reached into the pocket sewn to the inner side of his sleeve. He brought out first his silver pipe, then his fiddle and bow, in magically diminished form, then the two pieces of the broken stiletto, then a round white box, which he gave disdainfully to Glyneth “Rub this wax into the wound. Do not waste it; it is valuable.”

Glyneth warily put down the sword, and rubbed the wax upon Kul's cuts, slashes, bruises and stab-wounds, despite Visbhume's protests against her lavish employment of his personal commodities. With wonder Glyneth saw the cuts seal and the flesh become whole, to the magic of the balm. Kul sighed; Glyneth, working as gently as she could, spoke in alarm: "Why do you sigh? Do I hurt you?"

"No... . Odd ideas enter my mind... . Scenes of places I have never known."

Visbhume rose to his feet and arranged the set of garments. He spoke with frigid dignity: "I will now take wallet and

mount my carpet wole and be away from this unhappy site! You have done me incalculable harms, hurt my body and restrained my rightful exit from Tanjecterly. Still, in the circumstances, I will control my bitterness and make the best of affairs. Glyneth, my wallet, on this instant. Then, on my running carpet wole I will take my leave of you.”

Kul said shortly: “Sit down on the ground; if you run I am too tired to chase you. Glyneth, go to the carcasses yonder and find some straps and cords from their harness.”

Visbhume cried out in a brassy voice: “What now? Have you not dealt me



trouble enough?”

Kul grinned. “Not nearly enough.”

Glyneth brought straps, from which Kul fashioned a collar for Visbhume’s neck with a leash twenty feet long.

Meanwhile Glyneth gingerly explored Visbhume’s garments for secret pockets and removed all his magical adjuncts, which she tucked into the wallet.

Visbhume at last stifled his protests and sat crouched in surly silence. The eight-legged wole on which he had arrived had strayed no great distance and placidly cropped the sward with its feeding tubes. Kul climbed to its long flat back and threw down a pair of

anchors to prevent it from coursing away.

Glyneth addressed Visbhume: “Now: will you answer questions and tell us all we should know?”

“Ask away,” snapped Visbhume. “I must now serve you or risk damage to my poor body, where I already feel the pain of purple bruises. A person of my status is much demeaned.”

“If we are hungry, what shall we eat?”

Visbhume considered a moment, then licked his lips. “Since I too hunger, I will tell you how to find bounty. In the

wallet you will find a box. Take therefrom a scrap of cloth, and spread it smooth. Let fall upon it a drop of wine, a crumb of bread and a sliver of cheese.”

Glyneth followed instructions and the trifle of cloth instantly expanded to become a fine damask cover laden with all manner of viands, and the three ate to their satiation, whereupon the cloth once more became small.

Glyneth said: “Visbhume, you have been forming quiet plots. If they help you, then we have only ourselves to blame, and we will therefore be vigilant, and show you little mercy if you anger us.”

“Bah!” muttered Visbhume. “I could form a dozen plots a minute, or wear them like yonder tree wears its leaves, but to what avail?”

“If I knew, you would never learn from me.”

“Ah, Glyneth, your words are hurtful! At one time tender feelings existed between us; have you forgotten so soon?”

Glyneth grimaced but made no comment. “How can we send a message to Murgan?”

Visbhume seemed genuinely puzzled. “To what purpose? He knows you are

here?”

“So that he can open a new gate, and rescue us.”

“Murgen, no matter what his power, cannot break a new gate when the pendulum is swinging.”

“Explain, if you will:”

“I spoke in parable. There is no pendulum. At a certain pulse, time is static both here and on Earth, and the gate can be opened at one node or another. See the black moon which moves around the northern sky? It strikes a radius with a central pole and

somewhere along the radius a node can be opened, if pulses are in synchrony. It is a matter of exacting calculation, since time moves at different rates here and on Earth. Sometimes here time goes fast and on Earth slow, and sometimes the opposite. Only when time runs at the same rate, as determined by the pulses, can the gates be opened. Otherwise, gates could be opened anywhere at any time.”

“How can the gate be opened again, and when, and where?”

Visbhume rose to his feet and, as if in boredom or perhaps abstraction of thought, started to remove the collar

from his neck. Kul gave the leash a tug which sent Visbhume jumping in a ridiculous caper to keep his balance.

“Do that no more,” said Kul. “Be happy the strap is only around your neck and not through holes in your ears. Answer the question, and do not try to confuse us with verbiage.”

Visbhume growled: “You would take all my valuable knowledge and give me nothing, and still tie me by the neck, as if I were a cur dog or a Progressive.”

“But for your doing, we would not be here; have you forgotten?”

Visbhume blew out his thin cheeks. “No good cause is served in dredging up ancient history. That which is done is done, whether we rejoice or grieve! That is my slogan! At that twist in the prism known as ‘Now’ we are to concern ourselves only with immediate cases.”

“Just so. As of ‘now’ answer the question.”

Visbhume said loftily: “Let us work practically! I must take the lead, since the knowledge is mine, and you must trust me to consider our mutual interests. Otherwise I must in intricate detail school you in all the-”



Visbhume stopped short as Kul began to draw taut the leash. Kul said: “Answer!”

Visbhume said plaintively: “I was preparing my careful response! Your conduct lacks all gentility.” He cleared his throat. “The matter is complex, and, so I fear, beyond your understanding. Time moves by one phase on Earth and by another here. Each phase consists of nine quavers, or pulses, or, even better, constrictions in and out from the central node of what we call ‘synchronicity’. Is this clear? No? As I supposed. There is no point in going farther. You must trust my best judgment.”

Glyneth said: “You still have not

answered me. How do we return to Earth?"

"I am so doing! Between Earth and Tanjecterly, the synchrony lasts six to nine days, and, as we have seen has just ended. Then it sweeps away, along the radius of the black moon with the center node. At the next pulse, the gate will open into another place, but none so easy as Tanjecterly. Hidmarth and Skurre are demon-worlds; Underwood is empty save for a moaning sound; Pthopus is a single torpid soul. These were discovered and explored by Twitten the Arch-mage, and he compiled an almanac, which is of great value."

Glyneth brought a long narrow book with black metal covers from the wallet. The spine was like a sheath housing a black nine-sided metal rod with a golden knob at the end. Glyneth, withdrawing the rod, saw that each of the nine sides was engraved in crabbed golden characters.

Visbhume casually held out his hand. “Let me instruct myself; I have forgotten my calculations.”

Glyneth drew the book away. “What is the purpose of the rod?”

“That is a subsidiary instrument. Replace it in the sheath and hand me the

book.”

Glyneth replaced the rod and opened the book. The first page, indited in queer crawling marks with straggling tails and looping risers was illegible, but someone, perhaps Visbhume, had attached a sheet which would seem to be a translation of the original text. Glyneth read aloud:

“These nine places, along with the Gaeon Earth, form the ten worlds of Chronos, and he has skewered them all on his axis. By cunning effort I have, constrained the axis, and held it fixed: such is the magnitude, of my achievement.

“Of the nine worlds I warn against Paador, Nith and Woon; Hidmarth and Skurre are purulent places infested with demons. Cheng may well be home to the sandestins, but this is uncertain, while Pthopus is truly insipid. Only Tanjecterly will tolerate human men.

“In each, section, the almanac details the cycle of quavers and indicates the standard by which ingress and exit may be obtained. With the almanac is the key, and only this key will strike through the weft and allow passage. Lose not the key! The almanac is thereby useless!

“The calculations must be worked with precision. At the periphery of the quaver

the key opens a gate where it is struck.  
The central node is immutable. On earth  
it stands when I have fixed it. On  
Tanjeterly, it resides at the center of the  
Parly Place, at the town Asphrodiske,  
where dwell many many sad souls.

“Such is the domain of Chronos. Some  
say he is dead, but if one would  
discover the wraith, he need only tweak,  
the axis, and he shall learn his own truth.

“So say I, Twitten of Gaeon Earth.”

Glyneth looked up from the almanac.  
“Where is Asphrodiske?”

Visbhume made a petulant gesture.

“Somewhere off across the plains-a journey of far distance”

“And there we can return to Earth?”

“At the low pulse.”

“When will that be?”

“Let me see the almanac.”

Glyneth extracted the key, and gave the almanac to Kul. “Let him look but keep your fingers at his throat.”

Visbhume cried out in a tragic voice: “Replace the key! Will you not heed Twitten’s warning?”

“I will not lose it. Read what you wish to read.”

Visbhume studied the indexes and those calculations which he had already made. “The time will be measured by the black moon, on its way to opposition with now.”

“How long is that?

“A week? Three weeks? A month? There is no measure but the black moon. On Earth there will be a time much different, short or long: I do not know.”

“And if we use the key at Asphrodiske, where will we come out on Earth?”



Visbhume chuckled. “At Twitten’s Corners; where else?”

“Do we have time to reach Asphrodiske?”

“It is exactly as far as is Watershade from Twitten’s Corners.”

Glyneth mused: “The distance is far but not too far.” She held out her hand.

“Give me the almanac.”

“And I took you for a pretty flirtatious little softling!” growled Visbhume. “You are as hard as steel!” With poor grace Visbhume obeyed the order.

“Yonder is Visbhume’s carpet wole or whatever it is called; it stands placid and ready. Should we not ride to Asphrodiske in comfort and style?”

Kul jerked the leash. “On your feet! Go command your beast to our use.”

Visbhume ungraciously obeyed the order. The anchors were drawn aboard; with Glyneth and Kul riding in the pergola and Visbhume sitting disconsolately with legs dangling over the stern quarters, the wole set off across the plains of Tanjecterly.

# Chapter 16

## I

THE WOODCUTTER'S HUT STOOD DESOLATE in the forest, with all its magic gone. A shaft of sunlight slanted through the doorway and laid a skewed rectangle along the width of the floor, leaving the old table and bench in gloom. The silence was disturbed only by the sigh of wind among leaves.

Everything which had happened at the hut, or which might have happened, was part of the sad and arid past, and gone forever.

At Watershade Aillas, Dhrun and Shimrod passed a forlorn seven days. Shimrod, for once somber, could report only that Murgan had not abandoned his interest in the matter.

The dear familiar chambers, with the merry presence of Glyneth only a memory, were too melancholy to be borne. Shimrod took himself to Trilda while Aillas and Dhrun returned to Domreis.

Castle Miraldra was dreary and dull. Aillas occupied himself with routine business of the kingdom, while Dhrun made a desultory effort to resume his studies. Despatches from South Ulfland

caught Aillas' attention. The Ska had carefully assembled and fitted out a powerful army in the Foreshore, with the clear purpose of striking into South Ulfland, to destroy the Ulf armies and occupy Suarach, Oaldes and perhaps even Ys itself.

Aillas and Dhrun took ship for South Ulfland with new troops from Dascinet and Scola. They landed at Oaldes and rode at once to Doun Darric.

In conference Aillas learned that, of late, no major engagements had occurred, which suited him well. His strategy dictated the infliction of maximum enemy losses, while incurring a

minimum of his own: a kind of war for which he had shaped his army and which put the Ska at disadvantage. Effectively the Ska had lost control of North Ulfland's southern half, save where Castle Sank still served as a strongpoint. Aillas drafted a letter to Sarquin, Elector-king of the Ska:

To the attention of the noble Sarquin, Elector-King: I am the legal and ordained King of Ulfland. I find that your armies still tread upon my soii and hold my people in thrall.

I ask that you withdraw your armies to the foreshore, that you liberate all Ulfish thralls still in servitude, and that you

renounce your aggressive attempts against my land. If you act at once, I will demand no reparations.

If you fail to heed my request, your people will be killed and Ska blood will flow deep. My armies now exceed yours in number. They are trained to strike and strike again, but to take no blows in return. My ships control the Narrow Sea; we can burn your coastal towns at will. Shortly you will see black smoke rising along the shores of Skaghane, and your folk will know the same woe you have visited upon my people.

I call upon you to end your futile dream of conquest; you can not harm us; we can

destroy you, and bring you great grief.

These are the words of Aillas, King of Troicinet, Dascinet, Scola and Ulfland.

Aillas sealed the letter and sent the parcel to be delivered by a captive Ska knight. A week went by and the only response was a sudden movement of Ska troops. East from the Foreshore came the great black army, moving with ominous deliberation.

Aillas had no slightest intention of attacking so massive a force. Immediately however he sent skirmishers out to lure the Ska light cavalry within range of his archers.



Small parties circled to attack the baggage trains and to harass generally the lines of communication.

The Ska army split into two units of about equal strength, the first proceeding to the town Kerquar on the west and the second moving east to Blackthorn Heath, at the center of North Ulfland.

Ulf patrols became ever bolder, riding to within shouting distance of the Ska to call insults, in the hope of enticing a group away from the main body, where they could be ambushed and cut to pieces. At night Ska sentries went in fear of their lives and were as often murdered as not, and finally the Ska

themselves began sending out night patrols, and setting up their own ambushes, which to some extent diminished Ulf pressures, though the Ska still lost more than they gained.

Small signs indicated an erosion of Ska morale. Previously they had attacked, with flair and impunity, and had regarded themselves as invincible. Now that they had become quarry and victim, the mantle of invincibility quickly proved to be a thing of no substance and they long and well had mulled over the recollection of their recent defeat, which could not be explained away.

Aillas wondered if they could be

provoked into new errors of strategy which the Ulfish forces could exploit. He and his commanders, poring over maps, drew up a variety of battle-plans, each with notes to deal with contingencies.

So began an intricate and carefully timed set of operations: attacks, withdrawals, and ever more daring feints against the towns of the Foreshore, until these feints became actual raids, combined with assaults from the sea. At last, as Aillas hoped, the army based at Kerquar shifted to the northwest, with the effect of isolating the army on Blackthorn Heath from reinforcement in the case of sudden massive attack. Now, any plans for a

Ska invasion of South Ulfland seemed to have been postponed.

Aillas instantly sent a force of light cavalry to harass and engage the attention of this army, without actually coming to grips with the highly disciplined core of heavy cavalry. At the same time he sent a special siege army, equipped with two dozen massive arbalests, catapults and other siege engines against Castle Sank, the fortress guarding the southeast. He envisioned a quick and brutally powerful assault, and so it was, despite the rebuilding and reinforcement of the garrison.

In six hours the outer walls had fallen

and the citadel was under attack, with archers stationed upon high wooden towers keeping the parapets under fire. The machines sent great stones high to break open the roofs, then sent in fireballs to ignite the wrecked timbers. The defenders fought with desperate courage, and twice sallies of armoured knights were broken.

On the second night during the final stages of the operation, with flames roaring high, Aillas thought to glimpse Tatzel on the parapets. She wore an archer's helmet and carried a bow, with which she discharged arrow after arrow at the attacking forces. Words rose in Aillas' throat, but he held them back,

and watched in fascination. She looked down and saw him; nocking an arrow to the string of her bow, she drew far back with all her power, but before she could release, an arrow arched across space and plunged into her chest. She looked down in dismay and let the arrow fly against the merlon beside which she stood, and it glanced away. She seemed to sink to her knees, and fell backward out of sight.

Aillas was still not certain of her identity, in the flickering red light, but later she was not found among the survivors and Aillas lacked all inclination to sort through the charred corpses in search of gallant young

Tatzel.

The Ska army on Blackthorn Heath, learning of the assault on Castle Sank, broke camp and made a desperate effort to arrive at Sank in time to lift the siege. In their haste they departed from their usually tight formation of march, and raced north in a column, and here was the mistake for which Aillas had not only prepared but had prompted the Ska to commit. At a place called Tolerby Scrub, the Ska met an ambush of Ulf main forces, with sixty Troice knights leading the charge into the very heart of the Ska army, then wheeling and withdrawing, while from the other side came a similar charge of the Ulf barons.

The battle was far from easy, and only when troops coming down from the victory at Sank collapsed the Ska flank was the battle won.

There were few Ska survivors, and many casualties among both Ulf and Troice. Aillas, observing so much carnage, turned away in revulsion. Still, he was now master of all North Ulfland, save only the areas near the Foreshore, the Foreshore itself and the approaches to the great fort Poelitetz.

Two weeks later, Aillas, riding with fifty knights, approached the remaining Ska army near the town Twock. He sent a herald out under a flag of truce, with a



message:

Aillas, King of Trokinet, Dosinet, Scola, and Ulfland, requests a parley with the chief commander of the Ska army.

A pair of heralds set a table out upon the fell, spread it with a white cloth, set down chairs and on poles hung a gonfalon with the black and silver Ska emblem, and a gonfalon, quartered, displaying the arms of Troicinet, Dascinet, Ulfland and Scola.

With two knights by his side and a pair of heralds, Aillas went out to wait ten yards back of the table. Ten minutes passed, then, from the Ska army came a

similar group.

Aillas advanced to the table, as did his counterpart: a tall spare man, keen-featured, with black eyes and black-gray hair. Aillas bowed. “I am Aillas, King of Troicinet, Dascinet, and Ulfland.”

The Ska said: “I am Sarquin, King-elect of Skaghane and all the Ska.”

“I am happy to meet a person of ultimate authority,” said Aillas. “My work is thereby eased. I am here to arrange peace. We have reconquered our territory; the war is effectively won. Our hatred of you remains but it is not worth the spilling of any more blood. You

might still fight but now you are outnumbered, by warriors at least equal to your own. If you choose to fight on, there will be only boys, women and old men left on Skaghane. At this moment, I could land a force of three thousand men upon Skaghane and no one could halt me.

“I wish to wound or kill no more brave men, either yours or mine. These are the terms of my peace.

“You shall withdraw all your forces from Ulfland, including Poelitetz. You shall not carry with you wealth or treasures accumulated in Ulfland, nor may you herd horses, cattle, sheep nor swine. Knights may ride their mounts; all

other horses must be surrendered.

“You shall maintain sovereignty over the Foreshore, for the use and welfare of your people.

“You shall release all slaves, serfs, thralls and captives now in your custody, on Skaghane, along the Foreshore, and elsewhere, and deliver them with all kind and clement treatment to the town Suarach.

“You will agree not to conspire nor ally yourself with, nor give counsel, comfort nor assistance to the enemies of my rule: specifically, King Casmir of Lyonesse, nor to anyone else.

“Otherwise I make no demands upon you, for reparations or indemnities, or punitive damages for the lives of my people whom you have ravaged in your acquisitive lust.

“These terms are generous. If you accept them, you may return to Skaghane with honour, since your warriors have fought bravely, and surely these are conditions which will allow you comfort, prosperity, and in due course fellowship among the nations of the Elder Isles. If you reject them, you not only gain nothing but you bring disaster to your subjects and to your country.

“We cannot be friends, but at least we

need not be enemies. Those are my proposals. Do you accept or reject them?”

Sarquin, Elector-King of the Ska, spoke three words. “I accept them.”

Aillas rose to his feet. “In the name of all the men who otherwise would die, I thank you for your wise decision.”

Sarquin rose, bowed, turned and rejoined his army. Half an hour later the army broke camp and marched west into the Foreshore.

## II

THE WAR WAS WON. Ska troops departed Poelitetz, and were instantly replaced by a garrison of Ulf warriors. Audry, King of Dahaut, in due course protested this act to Aillas, claiming that Poelitetz was situated on the soil of Dahaut.

Aillas replied that while King Audry cited several points of technical interest, and used the resources of abstract logic in an adroit manner, he had actually made no connection with reality. Aillas pointed out that historically Poelitetz guarded Ulfland from Dahaut, but served no useful purpose whatever when controlled by the Dauts. The line of the Great Scarp more realistically defined

the boundary than did the Teach tac Teach watershed.

King Audry in a rage threw Aillas' letter to the floor and never bothered to reply.

Aillas and Dhrun returned to Troicinet, leaving Sir Tristano and Sir Maloof to oversee the details of the Ska withdrawal, which in any event went with scrupulous exactitude.

A few days after the return of Dhrun and Aillas to Domreis, Shimrod appeared at Castle Miraldra. After supper Aillas, Dhrun and Shimrod went to sit by a blazing fire in a small side parlour. After an awkward moment Aillas forced



himself to ask: “I suppose that you have nothing new to tell us.”

“There have been certain strange circumstances, but they change essentially nothing.”

“What strange circumstances are these?”

“Order in more wine,” said Shimrod.  
“They make long and dry telling.”

Aillas summoned the footman. “Two more-no, three more flasks of wine, since we must keep Shimrod in good voice.”

Shimrod said: “Good voice or not, much

is still unknown to us.”

Aillas, noting an indefinable hesitancy in Shimrod’s manner, seized upon the word: ” ‘Still’?”

“Still, yet, then and now. But I will tell you what I have come to learn. You will see that it is little enough. First, I will say that Tanjecterly is only one of ten worlds, including our good Gaeian Earth, which old Father Chronos swings on a noose. Some are the realms of demons, others are not even so useful as this. Visbhume opened a hole into Tanjecterly with his key, but it seems that sometimes holes open of themselves to let men fall through willy-nilly, to their vast

surprise, and so to disappear forever. But this is all to the side. A certain indomitable sorcerer by the name of Ticely Twitten made a study of these worlds and his almanac measures what he calls ‘pulses’ and ‘quavers’. Time does not go in Tanjecterly, for instance, in consonance with time here. A minute here may be an hour there, or the opposite may be true.”

“Interesting,” said Aillas. “So then?”

“My tale begins with Twitten. Hippolito of Maule acquired his almanac, and it was purloined by Visbhume. For reasons unknown, Casmir sent Visbhume to ask questions of Glyneth, and he took her to

Tanjeterly, for various reasons: one of these being Tamurello's hope that I or Murgan would foolishly trap ourselves forever. Instead, as you know, we sent Kul, that he might rescue Glyneth. In the absence of facts, it! is hard to judge his success ...”

### III

THE CARPET-WOLE COURSED OFF in a direction which Glyneth decided to call east, opposite to the point in the sky where she had first noted the black moon. This odd celestial object had already shifted perceptibly, veering toward the north while remaining the

same distance above the horizon.

For ten miles the wole ran along the riverbank, with open plains to the south. In the distance a band of long-legged beings took interested note of their passage and even began to make a rather menacing approach, but the wole increased its pace and the creatures lost interest in pursuit. The river swung away to the north and the wole set off across a seemingly limitless steppe, with short blue grass below and spherical trees scattered at far intervals.

Kul rode forward on the first shoulders of the beast, standing flat-footed with legs somewhat apart. Glyneth, perched

high on the cushioned bench of the pergola, sat where she could see in all directions. Had she chosen to do so, she might have stepped down to the rug which covered the wole's back and walked aft to where Visbhume sat hunched over the wole's hindquarters, his eyes liquid with resentment for the indignity of the leash around his neck. For a period Glyneth ignored Visbhume, save for an occassional glance to ensure that he might not be about his crafty tricks. Finally she descended to the rug and went aft. She asked Visbhume: "Is there no night here?"

"None."

“Then how do we keep time, and know when to sleep?”

“Sleep when you are tired,” snapped Visbhume. “That is the rule. As for keeping time, the black moon must serve as I A clock.”

“And how far is Asphrodiske?”

“That is hard to say. Several hundred leagues, perhaps. Twitten has not drawn maps for our ease and delectation.”

An idea came into Visbhume’s mind; he blinked and licked his lips. “Still, his surveys are exact. Bring the almanac and I will make the calculations.”

Glyneth ignored the request. She looked to the side, gauging the passing landscape. “At this pace we are surely travelling four or five leagues each hour. Will the wole tire?”

“It wants to rest and eat grass for the same time that it runs.”

“Then in fifty hours it will take us a hundred leagues. That is my reckoning.”

“The reckoning is fair and equable, but accounts neither for dangers nor delays.”

Glyneth looked up at the circling suns. “I am so tired now that I could sleep standing on my feet.”



“I too am tired,” said Visbhume. “Let us stop so that we may refresh ourselves. Tired as I am, I will keep the first watch, so that you and the beast may sleep.”

” ‘Beast’? Kul?”

“Just so.”

Glyneth went forward to Kul. “Are you tired?” Kul considered the state of his being. “Yes, I am tired.”

“Should we stop to sleep?”

Kul surveyed the landscape. “I see no urgent threat.”

“Visbhume has kindly offered to take the first watch, so that you and I might sleep in comfort.”

“Ah! Visbhume shows a rare magnanimity!”

“He also knows some dreadful tricks.”

“Just so. Our sleep might be sound and deep and long. Still, in the harness box I have discovered a fine length of rope, and Visbhume perhaps will oblige us after all.”

Arriving at a spot where two trees grew fifty feet apart, Kul brought the wole to a halt and dropped its anchor. With eager

interest Visbhume inquired: “What now? Do we rest? Shall I keep the first watch? If so, remove this leash, so that I may look right and left with all possible facility.”

“In good time,” said Kul. From the harness box at the back of the pergola he brought a coil of strong rope. He tied one end to one of the trees, then signaled to Visbhume, “Stand exactly here, halfway between the trees.”

With a wincing scowl Visbhume obeyed. Kul removed leash, knotted the rope around Visbhume’s neck, then, going to the other tree, drew the rope tight so that Visbhume was; fixed between the two

trees, unable to move in either direction far enough to free himself, even though his arms and hands were free.

Glyneth watched with approval. “Now you must search him well! There are pockets in his sleeves and his trousers and perhaps even his shoes.”

Visbhume cried out in fury: “Am I to be allowed no I privacy of person? This sort of search is contrary to every known rule of gentility.”

Kul carefully searched Visbhume’s garments, and it became clear that Glyneth, through diffidence, had failed to search Visbhume with sufficient care.

Kul discovered a short tube of unknown employment, a brown box containing what seemed to be a miniature cottage, and in the seams of Visbhume's pantaloons, two lengths of stiff if resilient steel wire. The inside of Visbhume's belt yielded a dagger. The boots, the cravat and the gathering of the pantaloons at Visbhume's bony ankles seemed innocent of contraband. Glyneth examined the miniature cottage. "This would seem a magic cottage. How is it made large?"

"That is a most valuable property," said Visbhume. "I do I not allow its general use."

Kul said: “Visbhume, so far your skin is largely whole. You have eaten well and you have ridden on the wole. If these conditions agree with you, answer each question directly and with truth; otherwise you shall come upon a great sadness.”

Visbhume blurted angrily: “Put the miniature house on the ground land cry out: ‘House, grow big!’ When you wish it to reduce, cry out: ‘House, grow small!’”

Glyneth put the miniature house on the ground and cried out: “House, grow big!” Immediately she was yielded a cottage of comfortable aspect, with

smoke already rising from the chimney.

Kul said: “Visbhume, you shall keep first watch, as you so kindly offered. If any tricks are left to you, which I do not doubt, try none of them, since I will be alert.”

Entering the house, Glyneth found a comfortable couch and throwing herself down, fell instantly asleep.

She awakened after an unknown period to find Visbhume sleeping on the ground beside the cottage while Kul sat drowsing in the doorway. Glyneth went across the room and stroked the black fur covering his scalp. Kul looked up.

“You are awake.”

“I will keep watch. Now you sleep.”

Kul rose from the chair and looked around the room. For a moment Glyneth thought that he might stretch out on the floor, but he lay down on the couch and was at once asleep.

Visbhume presently awoke. Glyneth pretended not to notice. Visbhume studied the situation through eyelids barely slitted open, through which his eyes glinted like the yellow eyes of a fox.

Visbhume studied Glyneth a moment or two. He whispered: “Glyneth!” Glyneth



looked toward him. Visbhume asked: “Is the creature asleep?” Glyneth nodded.

Visbhume spoke in the most cajoling of voices: “You know truly that your interests lie with me, the powerful and mighty Visbhume! So then: will you join with me in sacred and absolute cabal? We will defeat the monster beast, with his slavering threats and objectionable attitudes!”

“Indeed? And then?”

“You know the love I bear for you! Can you feel the quiver of a like feeling for me?”

“What then?”

“Then: away to Asphrodiske, and back to Earth at the, coming of the quaver.”

“And that will be when?”

“A short time, shorter than you might think!”

“Visbhume! You alarm me! Have we enough time?”

“If all goes well and I am in command.”

“But how do we know how long or short is our time?”

“By the black moon! When the radius

swings to the diameter exactly opposite the gate by which we entered, that is the time! Now, will you join me in deep and unassailable cabal?"

"Kul is terrible and strong."

"So am I! Does he think all my power is gone?"

"I hope so!"

Then you are with me?"

"Of course not."

"What! You prefer the beast to me, Visbhume who lives and dances to the thrilling musics?"

“Visbhume, sleep while you have the chance. Your foolishness is keeping Kul awake.”

Visbhume spoke in a low and almost sibilant tone: “For the last time you have flouted me, and how you shall regret it!”

Glyneth made no response.

Kul awoke; the three made breakfast upon milk, bread, butter, cheese, onions and ham from the pantry, then Glyneth called: “House, grow small!”

The cottage shrank quickly to miniature size, and Glyneth carefully returned it to

its box. They climbed aboard the wole and once again set off across the plain.

Today Visbhume wished to share the comforts of the pergola with Glyneth. “From this vantage I command a wide view! In a flash I can apprehend danger at a great distance!”

“You are the rearguard,” said Kul. “You must spy out dangers overtaking us from behind; that is your duty, and your best vantage is over the hindquarters, exactly as yesterday. Quick now! The black moon rolls around the sky, and we must arrive at Asphrodiske in good time.”

Across the plain of blue grass ran the

wole, the splayed legs coursing forward and back so that the tassels of the rug jerked to the motion. Kul knelt at the base of the pergola, leaning forward so that his massive shoulders almost filled the space between the wole's ocular horns. Glyneth reclined at her ease across the pergola's cushioned bench, one slim leg idly dangling, while Visbhume hunched at the far end of the rug, glumly looking back the way they had come.

To the north appeared a deep forest of dark blue and purple trees. Drawing near they saw a tall manse of dark timber, built to a style elegant and stately, with many narrow glass

windows, turrets and cupolas, as well as a dozen elaborate follies and crotchets included apparently for the sheer relief of boredom. To Glyneth's taste, the style verged upon the eccentric, though out here, overlooking this changeless plain, anyone's taste would seem as sound as any one else's, and Glyneth straightened in her seat, so as not to present a careless or untidy image to possible observation through the tall narrow windows.

As they passed by, a portal opened and out rode a knight in full armour of glossy black and brown metal. From his helm rose a high crest, beautifully wrought, of rods, disks and barbed prongs. The

knight rode a creature somewhat like a black splay-legged tiger with a row of sharp horns down its forehead, and carried a tall lance from which fluttered a purple banner, engaged with an emblem of dark red, silver and blue.

The knight halted at a distance of a hundred feet, and Kul politely brought the wole to a halt. The knight called out:

“Who are you, that crosses the breadth of my domain, with neither let nor leave?”

Glyneth called out: “We are strangers to this place, Sir Knight, and no one informed us of your rule. This being the



case, will you kindly grant us leave to pass on our way?"

"That is well and softly spoken," declared the knight. "I would be tempted to clemency, did I not fear that others, less courteous than yourself, might be emboldened to take liberties."

Glyneth declared: "Sir, our lips are sealed as if with bars of iron! Never will your forbearance be bruited abroad, and our reports will extol only the splendor of your carriage and the gallantry of your conduct. With our best regards to you and your dear ones, we will now hastily withdraw from your presence."

“Not so fast! Have I not spoken? You are in detention. Dismount and proceed to Lorn House!”

Kul rose to his feet and shouted: “Fool! Return to your manse while life remains to you!”

The knight lowered his lance. Kul jumped down from the wole, to Glyneth’s distress. She cried out: “Kul, get back up here! We will run away, and he may chase us if he wishes!”

“His steed is too fast,” said Visbhume.  
“Give me the tube you took from me and I will blow a fire-mite at him. No! Better! In my wallet is a trifle of mirror;

give that to me.”

Glyneth found the mirror and gave it to Visbhume. The knight aimed his lance at Kul; the triple-horned black tiger sprang forward. Visbhume made a sweeping motion with his hand; the mirror expanded to reflect the knight and his steed. Visbhume snapped away the mirror; the knight and his reflected image clashed together; both lances shattered and both knights were pitched to the ground where they drew swords and hacked at each other, while the tiger-mounts rolled and tumbled in a snarling screaming ball.

Kul jumped aboard the wole; it

lumbered away to the east, with the combat still raging behind.

Glyneth went to Visbhume. “That was good work and it will earn you consideration when the final accounting is made. Give me back the mirror.”

“Better, far better that it remains with me,” said Visbhume smoothly. “In emergencies I will therefore be swift to act.”

Glyneth asked pointedly: “Do you recall Kul’s admonition? He was anxious to fight the knight; you denied him his exercise and now he may be short-tempered.”

“Aaagh, the monstrous brute!” growled Visbhume under his breath, and with unwilling fingers relinquished the mirror.

Time passed; leagues were thrust astern. Glyneth tried to puzzle through the computations in Twitten’s almanac, but met no success. Visbhume refused to teach her, declaring that first she must learn two arcane languages and an exotic system of mathematics, each with its particular mode of graphic representation. Glyneth also found a chart, which Visbhume gracelessly interpreted for her. “Here is the Lakkady Hills, the River Mys and the hut; this is the great Tang-Tang Steppe, inhabited

only by a few rogue knights and bands of nomad beasts. This is where we now travel.”

“And this town here, by the river: is it Asphrodiske?”

Visbhume squinted at the chart. “That seems to be the town Pude, by the River Haroo. Asphrodiske is here, beyond these woods and the Steppe of Sore Beggars.”

Glyneth looked dubiously at the black moon, which had moved a considerable distance around the horizon. “It is yet a long way. Have we time?”

“Much depends upon the flow of circumstances,” said Visbhume. “If an experienced captain of far travels, such as myself, were in charge of the voyage, events might well go with facility.”

“We will give your advice every consideration,” said Glyneth. “You may also keep a sharp lookout for robber knights and nomad beasts.”

The travellers proceeded across Tang-Tang Steppe, but encountered no molestation either by robber knights or by nomad beasts, though occasionally in the distance they saw heavy long-necked beasts grazing upon the fruit of the trees, and a few sparse packs of two-legged

wolves hopping and loping across the middle distance. From time to time the creatures paused to stand high, the better to appraise the wole, with Glyneth lolling on the bench of the pergola, Kul below and Visbhume crouched at the rear.

Visbhume became drowsy and lay back on the rug to doze in the warmth of the suns' light. Glyneth, at a sudden sound, looked around to find that one of the wolves had trotted furtively up behind the wole, then jumped to the rug, where now, sitting on Visbhume's face, it sucked blood from his chest through the rasping orifices in the palms of its forepaws.



Kul jumped aft, seized the wolf, wrung its neck and threw it astern. Visbhume, with a lambent glare first at Kul, then back toward the corpse of the wolf, now being torn apart by four of its fellows, at last regained his composure. “Had I not been deprived of my things, this outrage could not have occurred!”

Glyneth gave him a scornful glance. “You should not have brought me here in the first place.”

“You must not blame me; I was so commissioned, by a highly placed person!”

“Who? Casmir? That is no excuse. Why

does he want to know about Dhrun?”

“A portent, or something of the sort, has caused him alarm,” said Visbhume sourly, candid only through the discomfiture of the wolf’s attack, for which it was convenient to blame Casmir. Glyneth pressed for further details, but Visbhume would say no more until she first responded to his questions with equal frankness, a suggestion which prompted from Glyneth only a laugh of contemptuous amusement, and Visbhume said darkly: “I will never forget such insults!”

The journey proceeded as before. The wolves ran behind for a period, hopping

and bounding on long legs, but at last uttered howls of rebuke after the wole and turned away to the south.

Leagues were vanquished by the wole's running feet, while the black moon drifted around the sky. The group halted to rest a second and then a third time. On each occasion Glyneth raised the magic cottage and caused a fine banquet to appear on the table, at which all dined to repletion. Visbhume, however, was not allowed to drink overmuch wine lest he become large and annoy the others with his boasting. He then went into a fit of tearful complaints for the plight in which he found himself.

Glyneth refused to listen to him. “Again I will point out that these troubles are of your own making!”

Visbhume started to refute her statement, but Glyneth stopped him short. “Neither Kul nor I care to waste our time with foolishness. Instead-” she brought the wallet to the table “-tell me, and I remind you of Kul’s views in regard to evasiveness, how I may blow fire-mites from this tube.”

“You cannot do so,” said Visbhume, smiling and tapping his hands on the table in time to some internal tune.

“And how would you do so?”

“First I would need the fire-mites. Are there any in the wallet?”

Glyneth looked blank. “I do not know.” She brought out a flask. “What is in this little flagon?”

“That is Hippolito’s mental sensitizer. One drop stimulates the mind and helps one achieve an enviable reputation for hilarity and wit. Two drops enhances the aesthetic propensities to an exquisite degree, so that the person so stimulated can translate the patterns of spiderwebs into song-cycles and epic sagas.”

“Three drops?”

“It has never been attempted by human man. Kul might wish to experience a sublime and aesthetic experience; for such as Kul, I recommend four or even five drops.”

“Kul is not an aesthete,” said Glyneth. “These are your healing salves and balms, and this is your hair tonic... . What is in this green bottle?”

Visbhume said delicately: “That, my dear Glyneth, is a tincture of erotic sublimations. It melts chaste maidens previously proof to both season and reason, and induces a wonderful emotion. When ingested by a gentleman, even of stately years, it lends a surge to

the flagging zest and invigorates that person who, for whatever reason, finds himself growing, let us say, absentminded.”

“I doubt if we will need this disgusting tonic,” said Glyneth coldly. She drew further objects from the wallet. “Here are your insect-bulbs; here is the tube and here the mirror. Cloth, bread, cheese, wine. Fiddle and bow; also pipes. Wires. What is their purpose?”

“They are useful when one wishes to cross a chasm, or to batter open stone walls. The peremptory spells are difficult to use.”

“And the fire-mites?”

Visbhume made a negligent gesture.

“The question is nuncupatory.”

Glyneth screeched: “Kul! Do not kill him!”

Kul slowly subsided to his chair.

Visbhume huddled mournfully in the corner. In sudden inspiration, Glyneth pointed to a line of what seemed decorative buttons running along the length of Visbhume’s sleeves. “The buttons! Visbhume, are these the fire-mites?... Kul, be patient. Pull off the buttons.”



“Better yet, Visbhume shall eat several of them.”

Visbhume looked up in startlement.

“Never!”

“Then give them here!”

“I dare not!” cried Visbhume. “As soon as they are detached they must be blown through the tube.”

Kul cut from Visbhume’s loose sleeves long strips of black cloth to which the fire-mites were affixed, and thenceforth, as Visbhume walked or moved his arms, his bony white elbows protruded from the rents.

Glyneth rolled the strips of cloth around the tube and so made a bundle. “Now then! Explain, if you will, how these are to be used.”

“Pull the button from the fabric and put it in the tube so that the head looks away, then blow at the person you wish to discommode.”

“What other trickeries are you concealing from us?”

“None! No more! You have scoured me bare! I am helpless!”

Glyneth repacked the wallet. “I hope that you are telling the truth, for your own

sake, since, truly, your misery only makes me ill.”

As before, the three slept in sequence. Visbhume protested loudly about sleeping outside for fear of the running wolves. He was at last allowed to sleep in the pantry with the door secured against his escape.

In due course the wole once more set off across the steppe: a rolling savannah dotted with spherical trees, of somewhat different colour than before, with occasional trees of mustard-ocher or black and maroon, rather than the carmine-red of the trees along the Mys River.

Ahead stood a gigantic tree six hundred feet tall. The first boughs left the trunk in a cluster of six, spaced symmetrically around the trunk, each terminating in a great ball of dark yellow-brown foliage, with other layers of branches similarly spaced, all the way to the top. In the distance could be seen several other such giant trees, some even taller.

As the wole passed by the first, the passengers noted to their fascination that in the bark of the trunk, two hundred feet above the ground, arboreal two-legged creatures had cut out apartments interconnected by rickety balconies. The tree-dwellers showed great excitement as the wole passed by, and came out to

crowd the balconies, pointing, signalling and performing gesticulations of defiance. Visbhume's obscene gestures only stirred them to a new pitch of indignation.

Inexorably the black moon veered around the sky. Glyneth tried to estimate how long and how far they had travelled but only succeeded in confusing herself. Visbhume pretended a like uncertainty and was ordered to the ground to run behind the wole until his comprehensions sharpened, and almost at once he was able to render a precise report. "Observe the pink star yonder! When the black moon passes under the star the way is open to Twitten's

Corners. That is my estimate. The reckoning is not certain to the minute,” he added virtuously. “I was reluctant to make a loose statement.”

“And how far is Asphrodiske?”

“Allow me to examine the map in the almanac.”

Glyneth, perhaps overly cautious, removed the key from its socket, then extended it to Visbhume.

Visbhume pointed a crooked knob-knuckled forefinger. “We would seem to be at this point, near this depicted river, which is the Haroo; and I believe I

observe the flow ahead, on the left hand. The town Pude marks the beginning of settled territory. Here is the Road of Round Stones; it runs past the Dark Woods and across the Plain of Lilies and so to Asphrodiske, here at this symbol. After Pude the distance still is thirty or forty leagues, and the time draws short. I fear that our sleep has been too sound and our travel too meager.”

“And what if we missed the time?”

“A wait at the axis would seem to be in order.”

“But if we returned to the hut where we

started, we could go through there the sooner; is that not correct?”

“So it is! You are a particularly clever girl: almost as clever as you are appealing to the eye.”

Glyneth compressed her lips. “Please keep your compliments to yourself; the implications make me sick to my stomach. When would the pulse again be favorable at the hut, if so it became necessary?”

“When the moon reached the same place in the sky. Notice these notations: they refer to the azimuth of the black moon.”



Glyneth went forward and reported to Kul what she had learned.

“Very well,” said Kul. “We will sleep less soundly and travel more briskly.”

Two or three leagues further along the way, a road slanted down from the north, where a small village of gray houses could be seen. It came around a forested knoll and led off into the east. Kul urged the wole upon the road, but the creature preferred to run on the blue turf, which provided a kinder footing. This road, according to Visbhume, might well lead all the way to Asphrodiske. He pointed at the map. “First we cross the River Haroo, here by the town Pude, then

Asphrodiske lies onward, across the Plain of Lilies.”

Down from the slopes of neatly tiered mountains flowed the River Haroo, to pass across the way to Asphrodiske. The road led to a stone bridge of five arches and away to the east, beside the village which Visbhume had named ‘Pude’.

Glyneth asked Visbhume: “Who are the people of the village? Did they come into being here?”

“They are folk from Earth, who across the ages have inadvertently dropped through sink-holes into Tanjecterly. A certain number have been placed here

for one reason or another by magicians like Twitten, and they too must bide on Tanjecterly.”

“That would seem a bitter fate,” said Glyneth. “How cruel to be torn away from those who love you! Do you not agree, Visbhume?”

Visbhume put on a lofty smile.

“Sometimes stem little reprimands become necessary, especially when one deals with wilful maidens, who refuse to share the bounty of their treasure.”

Kul turned his head and stared at Visbhume, whose smile instantly faded.

Along the road came a wagon, carrying a dozen peasants. They turned to stare in wonder and awe as the wole went by. Their attention seemed primarily fixed upon Kul, and several jumped down from the wagon to take up staves as if to defend themselves from attack.

“That is an odd attitude,” said Glyneth. “We offered them no threat. Are they timid or merely hostile to, strangers?”

Visbhume gave a fluting chuckle. “They are fearful for good reason. Feroces live in the mountains and no doubt have earned themselves a dubious reputation. I foresee problems. It might be wise to dismiss Kul from our company.”

Glyneth called to Kul. “Come into the pergola, on the low bench and draw the curtain, so that the village folk will not be alarmed.”

Kul somewhat reluctantly slid into the lower bench of the pergola, and drew the curtains. Visbhume, watching carefully, came forward and stood in Kul’s previous place. He looked back at Glyneth: “In case questions are asked, I will say that we are pilgrims visiting the monuments of Asphrodiske.”

“Be sure that is all you say,” came Kul’s voice from behind the curtains.

Glyneth, now uneasy, looked in the

wallet and brought out a Tormentor Bulb, which she placed in her own pouch.

The wole ran smartly across the bridge and down the principal street of the village. Visbhume seemed extraordinarily alert, and looked back and forth, from side to side. He touched a pad on the wole's crest and the creature sensibly slowed its pace. Kul rasped: "What are you doing? Keep moving at speed!"

"I do not wish to arouse adverse comment," said Visbhume. "It is best to pass through settled areas at a seemly and sober pace, so that they will not

think us irresponsible hoodlums.” From a tall structure of dressed stone stepped three men wearing tight black trousers, voluminous tunics of green leather and elaborate widebrimmed hats. The foremost held up his hand. “Halt!”

Visbhume brought the wole to a standstill. “Whom is it our privilege to address?”

“I am the Honourable Fulgis, Constable and Magistrate for the village Pude. And you?”

“Innocent pilgrims bound for Asphrodiske, that we may see the sights.”

“All very well, but have you paid toll for the use of the bridge?”

“Not yet, sir. What is the fee?”

“For such a medley as I see before me, ten good dibbets, of sound talk.”

“Very good! I was afraid that you might ask for a tassel from the rug, each of which is worth twenty dibbets.”

“I meant to include in the toll such a tassel.”

“What?” Visbhume jumped to the ground. “Is not this slightly excessive?”



“Would you prefer to return over the bridge and swim your way across the river?”

“No. Glyneth, pass me down my wallet, that I may pay Sir Fulgis his due.”

Glyneth wordlessly passed down the wallet. Visbhume now took Fulgis aside and spoke earnestly into his ear. Kul spoke to Glyneth in a husky whisper: “He is betraying us! Start the wole to running!”

“I do not know how!”

Visbhume returned and taking the wole led it into a walled courtyard. Glyneth

called sharply: “What are you doing?”

“There are certain formalities which I fear we must endure. Kul may be discovered. If he becomes violent, he will be dealt with harshly. You, my dear, may step down from the pergola.”

Kul jumped from the pergola, seized the wole’s horns and caused it to canter from the courtyard. Warriors ran forward and hurled nooses; Kul was pulled from the wole and lay dazed for an instant; during this time he was bound hand and foot with many turns of rope, then dragged off to a barred cell in the side of the courtyard.

The constable spoke to Visbhume: “Well done! Such a feroce might well have done damage!”

“It is a clever beast,” said Visbhume. “I suggest that you kill it instantly, and make an end to its threat.”

“We must wait for the Lord Mayor, who may well call in Zaxa and provide us some sport.”

“And who is Zaxa?” asked Visbhume indulgently. “He is defender of the law and executioner. He hunts feroce in the Clone Mountains and it is his delight to derogate their prideful savagery.”

“Zaxa will do famously with Kul. Now we must be on our way, since time is short for us. From my esteem, I give you personally two rich tassels, worth many dibbets. Glyneth, we will proceed. It is a pleasure to be rid of that cantankerous beast.”

## IV

THE WOLE PACED SMARTLY EASTWARD beside the Road of Round Stones, with Visbhume riding in state high on the top bench of the pergola and Glyneth huddled miserably below. Visbhume, with the wallet once more under his command, made a suspicious

inspection to ensure that Glyneth had sequestered none of his properties to her own use. Satisfied that all was as it should be, he brought out the almanac and, discovering a mistake in his computations, made a flurry of new measurements, but discovered nothing to alarm him.

At last reassured, he brought out his fiddle, extended the bow to its almost excessive length, tuned to a call of "Twiddle-dee-doodle-di-diddle-dee-dee!" then played a rousing selection of ear-tickling tunes: tantivets and merrydowns, fine bucking jigs and cracking quicksteps, rollicks, lalts and fare-thee-wells. His elbows swung first

high then low, while his feet pounded the floor of the pergola in full justice to the meter. Peasants standing by the side of the road looked in wonder to see the great eight-legged wole running at speed, with Visbhume playing fine music and Glyneth sitting glumly below, and when the peasants returned to their farmsteads, they had much to tell of the strange sights they had seen and the excellent music they had heard.

Visbhume suddenly remembered a new aspect to the calculations, which he had not heretofore considered. He put aside fiddle and bow and made his corrections, to such good effect that, halfway along the road to Asphrodiske,

he decided that the black moon afforded him somewhat more than adequate time for all his purposes, which brought him a great exhilaration of spirit.

The road now had entered the fringes of the Dark Woods. Visbhume steered the wole to the side and off across a little meadow of blue grass to the shade of three dark blue trees, where he halted and threw down the anchor. With stately demeanor he descended to the sward, set out the miniature cottage and caused it to expand. Finally he turned to Glyneth, still on the low bench of the pergola.

“My dear, you may alight.”

“I prefer to stay here.”

Visbhume spoke crisply, with an overtone of menace in his tone:

“Glyneth, step down from the wole, if you please. We have important matters to discuss.”

Glyneth jumped down from the wole, ignoring Visbhume’s hand. With a cool smile, Visbhume signaled Glyneth to the doorway of the cottage. She entered and seated herself, while Visbhume closed the door and shot the bolt.

“Are you hungry?” asked Visbhume.

“No.”

As soon as she had spoken Glyneth



realized that she had made a mistake. Any procedure which used time was to her advantage.

“Do you thirst?”

Glyneth gave a noncommittal shrug and Visbhume brought wine from the cupboard and poured full two goblets.

“My, dear, we are at last genuinely and intimately alone! Is that not a thrilling thought? I have yearned long for this moment, meanwhile ignoring insults and indignities as befits a knight of chivalry. Such matters-pah! They are the twitchings and squealings of small minds; noblesse allows me to put them aside, as a gallant ship rides over the

spatter and spray of the envious waves!  
Drink now! Let this good vintage bring  
warmth to your veins! Drink, Glyneth,  
drink! .... What? You shun the wine; you  
push aside the goblet? Truly, I am not  
pleased! Rather than sparkling eyes and  
excited mouth I find a squint, a hunching,  
a dyspeptic pinch of nostril, a grim  
behavior. This is a time for gayety! I am  
somewhat puzzled by your posture. You  
crouch and watch me sidelong as if I  
were a rat eating the breakfast cheese.  
On your feet, then! Let us act in the  
manner of dainty lovers! Be so kind as to  
loose your garments and let them slide,  
and so to display your lovely supple  
limbs!”

Glyneth shook her head. “I will do nothing like this.”

Visbhume smiled. “Really? What a pity that I lack a full measure of time so that I might match you at every turn! But time is of the essence; the affair must be effected in a makeshift manner, and first, for reasons which will become clear to you, I must know what I brought you here to learn. Quickly now, that we devote the greater time to our pleasure!”

Temporizing, Glyneth asked: “What did you wish to know?”

“Ha hah! Can you not guess?”

“Not really. I am puzzled.”

“Then I will tell you exactly! After all, why should you not be told? Surely you will never use the knowledge to my disadvantage! Am I correct in this?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I am correct! Listen then! King Casmir heard a prediction regarding the first-born son of Princess Suldrun. There is mystery in connection with Suldrun’s child. Princess Madouc is a changeling, but what of the boy the fairies took? There was a boy who left Thripsey Shee and who became your companion. His name is Dhfun, but he

would seem too old to be Suldrun's child. Who then is Dhrun's mother? Where is that boy whom the fairies took and gave Casmir Madouc in return? This boy would now be five or six years old. By the prediction he will sit on Evandig before Casmir or some such affair, and Casmir is anxious to locate him."

So that he may put the child to death?"

Visbhume smiled and shrugged.

"Such is the way of kings. Now you can understand the import of my curiosity. Do you so understand?"

"Yes!"

“Excellent! Then, in all kindness, I ask that you tell me what you know of the matter, and I therefore put this easy and harmless question to you: who is Dhrun’s mother?”

“Dhrun never knew his mother,” said Glyneth.

“He was raised by fairies and spent a most curious childhood. He once told me the name of Madouc’s mother; she had consorted with men and her name was Twisk.”

“Words, words, words!” cried Visbhume fretfully. “They are not responsive to my question! Once more:

who is or was Dhrun's mother?"

Glyneth shook her head. "Even if I knew, I would tell you nothing, since it might aid King Casmir, our enemy."

Visbhume spoke sharply: "You try my patience! But I have a remedy!" He brought a little green glass bottle from his wallet. "This, as you will recall, is the true and veritable Potion of Amour. One drop brings yearnings to every nook and cranny the female soul and encourages prodigies of sexual valor in every male. Suppose that I forced you to ingest not just a single sip, but two or even three? In your urgent zeal you would tell me what I wanted to know in

a trice, nor would you be at all loath to step from your garments.”

Tears rolled down Glyneth’s cheeks. What a sorry end for my life! Visbhume clearly intended either to kill her outright, or at best, to abandon her on Tanjecterly. Visbhume came up to her with his bottle. “Come then, open that pretty little mouth. One drop shall I give you; one drop will suffice, and if not, then we shall try another.”

V

IN HIS CELL AT THE TOWN PUDE, Kul rubbed the ropes binding his arms against a sharp edge of the door-frame,



and rasp them through. He untied the ropes from his legs, broke open the door to the cell with a single lurch and burst out into the courtyard. A pair of guards jumped up to intercept him but were sent sprawling; Kul took his sword from the gatehouse; then ran out into the street and eastward along the road.

Fulgis the constable organized a party of pursuit, including! the redoubtable Zaxa, a hybrid creature half-man and half-hespid batrache, with arms like baulks of timber, a heavy? gray hide proof against spear, arrow, claw or fang. Zaxa rode a small pacing wole, and carried his fabulous sword Zil, while the others of the party rode steeds of other

descriptions.”

The posse set off in hot pursuit and presently overtook Kul who ran into the Deep Woods. The pursuers coursed behind, shouting and hallooing, and exchanging repartee. Kul dropped from a tree into their midst, destroyed eight warriors and ran off. The pursuers came after, more cautiously, consulting among themselves and exchanging terse instructions, with Zaxa in the lead. Kul slid around to their rear and attacking once more, wrought further carnage. By the time Zaxa arrived on the scene, Kul was gone once more, only to leap from the shadows, seize the constable Fulgis and break his head against a tree trunk,

but Zaxa at last confronted him.

Zaxa bellowed: “Feroce, you are clever, you are fierce but now you must pay for your murders, and the cost shall be high!”

Kul responded: “Zaxa, allow me to make a suggestion. you go your way and I will go mine. In this case, neither shall take harm from the other. It is a plan which redounds to the profit of both. Can you not perceive the wisdom of this proposal?”

Zaxa stood back blinking as he pondered the concept. At last he spoke: “No doubt there is something in what you say. But I

rode this far distance with the express and stated purpose of lopping away your head with my fine sword Zil, and it seems somehow bootless to turn about now and ridt emptyhanded back to Pude. The townsfolk would ask: 'Zaxa did you not ride from town pell-mell that you might destroy a murderous feroce?' And I could but answer: 'True! That was my purpose!' Then they would say: 'Ah, the clever brute evaded your search!' To this I would be forced to answer: "Quite to the contrary! We met and spoke a few civil words to other, then I came home.' The townsfolk might say nothing aloud, but I feel that I would lose esteem around the neighborhood. Therefore, even at the risk of discomforture I feel

myself obliged to kill you.”

“What if you die first?”

Zaxa bellowed and beat his great chest. “Once I lay hands on you, the issue is closed. Prepare to learn the full extent of the infinite hereafter.” The two joined battle. In the end, panting, bloody, and with one arm mangled, Kul stood above the corpse of Zaxa. He gazed around the forest glade, but the surviving villagers, seeing how the battle went, had departed. Kul looked down at Zaxa’s great gray carcass and almost could feel a pang of pity. Kul took up Zaxa’s magnificent sword Zil, staggered to Zaxa’s mount, climbed to the seat, and set

off in search of Visbhume and Glyneth.

Only a mile down the road Kul spied the anchored wole and the house. Keeping to cover he approached, dismounted and went to the door. From within he heard a sudden crash of broken glass.

Kul burst the door wide and stood in the doorway. Visbhume, engaged in tearing Glyneth's clothes from her body, looked up in a panic. A bottle of green glass lay broken in the place where Glyneth had seized and thrown it. Kul hurled Visbhume against the wall with such force that Visbhume fell senseless to the floor.

“Glyneth ran sobbing to Kul. “What have they done to you? Oh, your poor arm! My dear poor wonderful Kul, you are hurt!”

“But not too badly,” said Kul. “I am alive, and Zaxa is learning the length and breadth of the infinities.”

“Sit in the chair, and let us see what can be done for you.”

## VI

AGAIN THE WOLE RAN EASTWARD toward Asphrodiske, beside the Road of Round Stones. In a clothes-press at the back of the cottage

Glyneth had found garments to replace those which Visbhume had torn: peasant trousers of striped gray, black and white bast and a blouse of coarse blue linen. She had done her best to ease Kul's wounds, mending his cuts and slashes and contriving a sling to support his arm until the fractured bone might mend. Zaxa had sunk his fangs into Kul's shoulder, injecting a poisonous saliva, and the wound had mortified.

"Take the knife," said Kul. "Cut. Let the blood flow. Then dust on the powder."

Glyneth, gray-faced, took a deep breath, and holding her hand steady, slashed deep into the wound, releasing a gush of



noxious matter and then a flow of healthy red blood. Kul groaned in relief and stroked Glyneth's hair, then sighed once again and looked away. "At times. I see strange visions," said Kul. "But it was not intended that I should dream, especially impossible dreams."

"Impossible dreams come into my head too, sometimes," said Glyneth. "They confuse me and even frighten me. Still, how can I help but love you, who are so brave and kind and gentle?"

Kul gave a mirthless laugh. "So I was intended to be." He turned away and gave his attention to Visbhume. "I would kill you at this moment, except that we

still need your guidance. How goes the direction of the moon?”

Visbhume painfully rose to his feet.

“What if I guide you correctly?”

“You will be allowed to live.”

Visbhume showed the caricature of an airy and confident smile. “I will accept that condition. The black moon is close on the quaver. You have loitered overlong.”

“Then let us be away.”

Visbhume made as if to take up his wallet, but Glyneth ordered him to stand back. She reduced the cottage, packed it

away. The three climbed aboard the wole and once again rode toward the pink star, now almost in contact with the black moon.

As before, Glyneth rode the high seat in the pergola, Kul crouched by the wole's horns and Visbhume sat at the hindquarters, looking to the side with eyes as liquid and large as those of a lemur. Glyneth rode in a welter of a dozen emotions, and any one of them, so she felt, might bring her heartbreak. Despite the salves and powders, Kul was not the Kul of old; perhaps, thought Glyneth, he had lost too much blood, for now his skin had taken on a pallor and the crispness had gone from his

movements. She sighed, thinking of her return to Earth. Already Tanjecteriy had become the reality and Earth the fanciful land behind the clouds.

League after league fell astern to the thrust of the wole's running legs, and now the road led across the Plain of Lilies. In the distance appeared a line of low hills, a town of gray houses and, somewhat to the north, a low flat dome of gleaming gray-silver metal.

Visbhume came to stand by the pergola. He spoke to Glyneith: "My dear, I will need the almanac, that I may find the great axis."

Glyneth removed the key from its socket and handed the almanac to Visbhume, who read the text with attention, then studied a small detail map.

“Aha!” said Visbhume. “Fare to the side of the dome; we should see a platform, and thereon an iron post.”

Glyneth pointed. “I see the platform! I see the post!”

“Then forward in haste! The black moon has sounded the pulse, and here the time is short, without pause or rest.”

At best speed the wole coursed across the countryside and arrived at the side of

the dome. “That is an old temple, which may well be deserted now,” said Visbhume. “On to the platform. Glyneth, the key!”

“Not yet,” said Glyneth. “And in any event I will use the key.”

Visbhume made an annoyed chattering sound. “That is not as I planned; it is impractical!”

“Nevertheless, you shall not pass until both Kul and I are safely through the portal.”

“Bah!” whispered Visbhume. “Then up to the platform, and halt! ... Glyneth,

alight! Kul, down from your perch! To the post!”

Glyneth went to the steps leading up to the platform. Kul wearily stepped down to the ground and followed. Visbhume pulled the pipes from his pocket and played a shrill discordant arpeggio. The wole bellowed in rage and lowering its head charged down upon Kul. Visbhume came dancing with knees high, blowing tones at angry discord. Kul tried to jerk aside, but the spring was gone from his legs. The wole hooked him with its horns, and tossed him high.

Glyneth ran crying back down to the limp form. She looked up at Visbhume in

horror and hatred. “You have betrayed us once again!”

“No more than you! Look at me! I am Visbhume! You call endearments to this creature who is half a beast, and only partly a man; it is unnatural! Yet you scorn me, the proud and noble Visbhume!”

Glyneth ignored him. “Kul lives! Help me with him!”

“Never! Are you mad?”

“Now quickly! He lives.”

“shall I call the wole to trample him?”



Glyneth looked up in horror. “No!”

“Tell me: who is Dhrun’s mother? Tell me!”

Kul whispered: “Tell him nothing.”

“No,” said Glyneth. “I will tell him; it can make no great difference. Suldrun was Dhrun’s mother and Aillas his father.”

“How is that possible, with Dhrun now twelve years old?”

“A year in the fairy shee is like ten years of life elsewhere.”

Visbhume gave a crow of exultation. “That is the knowledge I have been seeking!” He snatched the key from Glyneth’s hands, and jumped back as if dancing to some surging music heard by himself alone. He made a flamboyant flourish. “Truly, Glyneth, what a little fool you are! If you had spoken long ago, we would have been saved both toil and pain, from which I profit not at all! Little does Casmir care! He will only commend me for the results and call me efficient.

“Now then: will you come to Earth in a submissive manner, and there do my bidding?”

Glyneth fought to keep her voice under control. "I cannot leave Kul!" She turned her head so as not to look at Visbhume. "Take us both safely to Earth, and I will do your bidding."

Visbhume judiciously held high his finger. "No! Kul must stay! He has treated me with contumacy; he must be punished. Come, Glyneth!"

"I will not leave without him."

"So be it! Remain here and cherish this beast you love with so peculiar a passion! Give me now my wallet!"

"I will not give over the wallet."

“Then I will blow a blast on my pipes.”

“And I will throw a Tormentor bulb at you. I should have done so before!”

Visbhume uttered a curse, but dared delay no longer. “I am away for Earth, where I will enjoy honours and wealth; goodbye!”

Visbhume leapt up to the platform, struck with his key, and disappeared from view.

Glyneth knelt beside Kul, who lay with eyes closed. Glyneth stroked his forehead. “Kul, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.”

“I am here with you. Can you manage to climb upon the wole? We will take you to a quiet place in the forest and you shall rest until you are well.”

Kul opened his eyes. “The wole is an uncertain creature. It has done me a great harm.”

“Only at the bidding of Visbhume’s pipes. Otherwise it seems an orderly creature, and it runs well.”

“That is true. Well then, let me see if I can climb on its back.”

“I will help you.”

Attracted by the activity, folk from the town had started to gather and some of them began to jeer Glyneth's attempts to help Kul. Glyneth paid the crowd no heed, and finally Kul half-climbed, half-fell aboard the wole. Now the crowd moved in close and surrounded the wole and started to pluck tassels from the rug. Glyneth brought a Tormentor bulb from the wallet and tossed it into the crowd, which immediately dispersed amid cries of pain, and the wole was free to go its way.

An hour later Glyneth took the wole veering across a meadow and behind a

copse, where she dropped anchor and set up the house. Kul for a period lay in a daze, and Glyneth watched him anxiously. Was her imagination playing her tricks, or were odd changes occurring within Kul, causing his expression to move and change and at times even blur?

Kul opened his eyes to find Glyneth watching him. He spoke in a soft drained voice. "I have had strange dreams. When I try to remember, my head swims." He made a fretful movement and started to raise himself, but Glyneth pushed him back. "Lie quietly, Kul Rest, and never mind the dreams!"

Kul closed his eyes and spoke in his vague soft voice: "Murgan spoke to me. He said that I must guard you and bring you back safe to the hut. It is proper that I love you, because that is my reason for being alive. But you must not waste your emotion on me. I am half-beast, and one of the voices I hear is the voice of the feroce. Another voice is reckless and cruel, and it urges me to unspeakable deeds. The third voice is the strongest and when it speaks the others are still."

Glyneth said: "I too have thought long and deeply. All you say is true. I am awed by your strength and grateful for your protection, but I love another part of you: your kindness and bravery, and



these were not taught you by Murgan. They come from somewhere else.”

“Murgan’s orders ring in my mind: I am to guard you and bring you safe to the hut, and since we have no better place to go, that shall be our destination.”

“Back the way we came?”

“Back the way we came.”

“Whenever you are strong enough to travel: then we will go.”

# Chapter 17

## I

TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FINAL GOBLIN FAIR of the Season, Melancthe arrived at that inn near Twitten's Corners known as 'The Laughing Sun and The Crying Moon'. She engaged her customary apartments, then at once went off to the meadow, where she hoped to find Zuck and remind him of their contract in connection with the flowers.

Zuck had only just arrived and, with the aid of a nondescript boy, unloaded his goods and appurtenances from a pony

cart. At the sight of Melancthe, he politely nodded and touched the brim of his cap with his first two fingers and proceeded with his work; apparently the provision of flowers for Melancthe had not yet occupied his attention.

Melancthe made a sibilant sound of annoyance and confronted Zuck where he worked at his shelves. “Have you forgotten our agreement?”

Zuck paused in his work and gave her a blank sideglance. His face cleared. “Ah, yes! Of course! You are the lady who so anxiously wanted flowers!”

“Quite so, Zuck; have you forgotten so

soon?”

“Of course not! But many small details throng my mind and detract from my attention. Just a moment.”

Zuck gave the boy instructions, then took Melanthe to a nearby bench. “You must understand that in our business we often deal with persons who talk largely but put little gold upon the counter. As I recall, you wished another flower or two, to grace your lovely hair.”

“I want all the flowers, be they one, two, ten or a hundred.”

Zuck nodded slowly and looked off

across the meadow. “At last we understand each other! Such flowers command large prices; I already have a list of customers as impatient as you, and I have yet to consult my supplier in regard to the produce of his secret garden.”

“Your other customers must look elsewhere, and you will be adequately paid, never fear!”

“In that case you must apply to my booth tomorrow at this time, when I hope to have definite news from the gardener.”

Melancthe could extract no further information from Zuck, and most

especially he refused to identify the mysterious gardener who nurtured such remarkable blooms, and at last Melanthe returned to the inn, fretful and dissatisfied but unable to implement her wishes.

As soon as she was out of sight, Zuck thoughtfully returned to his work. After a bit he called to the boy, who on closer inspection seemed to be either full falloy, or falloy with traces of goblin and humankind. His stature was that of human youth, with a supple easy quality to his movements; otherwise he showed a silver skin, pale green-gold hair and enormous eyes with dark silver pupils in the shape of seven-pointed stars. He was

a pretty lad, calm, slow and even somewhat naive. Zuck had found him a willing worker and paid him well, so that, in general, affairs went well between the two.

Zuck now called the boy's name:  
“Yossip! Where are you?”

“Here, sir, resting under the cart.”

“Come here, if you please; I have an errand for you.”

Yossip came around to the front of the booth. “What is this errand?”

“No great matter. This summer you came

to work one day with a fine black flower, which, as I recall, you left on the counter, and which I later gave away to one of my customers.”

“Ah yes,” said Yossip.

“A flower from my secret garden.”

Zuck ignored the remark. “I am of a mind to put out some trifling decoration, to distinguish our booth and mark it from the ruck. To this end, a few flowers might be just the thing. Where did you obtain the black blossom?”

“Out in the forest, along Giliom’s Lane, at a place I like to consider my secret



bower. This summer I found only a single bloom, though I noticed several buds.”

“A few flowers may be enough. After all, we are not flower-merchants or herbalists! How far is the garden? Direct me and I will cut exactly to my needs.”

Yossip hesitated. “I remember neither landmarks nor exact distances. I myself will find the place with difficulty. Still, if you want the flowers, instruct me, and I will bring them here.”

“A good idea,” said Zuck. “Take the pony cart, so that you may make haste. Ride out Giliom’s Lane this very

moment; cut neither buds nor seed-pods, only those flowers which have come into full bloom. In this manner we will not injure the growth.”

“Just so,” said Yossip. “I will need a sharp knife to cut the stems and a bite of bread and cheese to stay me along the way, which, as I recall, is two or three or even four miles down the lane.”

“Go then, and do not loiter!”

As soon as Yossip had departed, Zuck closed the booth. He borrowed a mount from an acquaintance at a nearby booth and set off after Yossip. He rode with stealth and caution, pacing himself by the

squeak and clatter of the pony cart. When the lane turned, Zuck hastened forward, to peer along its way ahead, and then ride swiftly to the next turning, so remaining close behind Yossip but always out of sight.

The sound of the cart suddenly ceased. Zuck dismounted, tied the horse and advanced on foot. The cart had halted in the middle of the lane and Yossip was nowhere to be seen.

“Well done!” said Zuck to himself. “Here is the site of the mysterious garden! It is all I need to know!” Now-to return to the booth in haste, and Yossip would never know that his secret had

been broached.

Zuck's curiosity prompted him to steal forward, for a better indication as to the location and size of the flower bed. Step by wary step he came down the road, running at last on tip-toe, darting glances to right and left.

Yossip stepped from the shadows carrying a small bouquet of four flowers. He seemed not at all surprised to find Zuck on hand.

"I came in haste," said Zuck. "I decided to use bunting and multicolored streamers for my decoration, rather than despoil the flower bed; therefore I

thought to inform you at once of my new plans.”

“That was kind of you,” said Yossip. He seemed to have difficulty speaking; he warbled and lisped. “But what of these flowers I have already cut?”

“Bring them along; better yet, give them into my care. Are there others in bud?”  
“Very few.”

Zuck looked frowningly slantwise at Yossip. “Why are you speaking with so odd a voice?”

Yossip grinned, showing silver teeth.  
“As I worked, I disturbed the soil and

discovered this wonderful gem.” He took a lambent green sphere from his mouth. “For convenience I carry it thus.”

“Amazing!” said Zuck. “Allow me to examine it.”

“No, Zuck! By stealth you learned the secret of my garden. By nature, I am easy, even ingenuous; but on this occasion I must pass a judgment, and your deceit must be punished by death.” So saying, Yossip stabbed Zuck first in the neck with the knife he had used to cut flowers, then in the heart. Then, to halt Zuck’s twitching, he thrust the knife hard into Zuck’s right ear, all the way to the hilt. “Now then, Zuck! We have properly

put an end to your skulkishness. I will say no more of the matter.”

Yossip rolled the corpse into the ditch, and returned to the meadow, leading the horse Zuck had ridden behind the can. Yossip returned the horse to its owner, who asked in wonder: “And where is good Zuck, who rode off so briskly?”

“He has gone to examine a new line of merchandise,” said Yossip. “I must meanwhile take care of the booth.”

“That is a great responsibility for an inexperienced stripling like yourself! If you find any difficulties, or if you suspect that you are being cheated, call

me and I will set matters right!”

“Thank you, sir! I am much relieved.” The time was still two hours short of sundown. Yossip opened the booth, arranged the flowers in vases and, after some hesitation, placed the green pearl on display, in a dish on one of the back shelves. “It is a wondrous gem,” he told himself. “Still, what use is it to me? I am not one for earrings nor other adornments. Well, we shall see. The gem must bring a good price or I will not sell.”

In the morning Melancthe appeared early and looked here and there. She noticed the flowers and gave a glad cry. “Where



is the good Zuck?"

"He is searching out new merchandise," said Yossip. "The booth is in my care."

"At least he has found flowers for me! Bring them forward; they are mine alone and must never be sold elsewhere!"

"As you wish, lady."

Melancthe took possession of the flowers. They were indeed of startling distinction, with colours that seemed to shudder with the force of their nature. Each was different; each projected a unique personality. The first: pungent orange, mingled with vermilion, plum-

red and black. The second: seagreen with purple glowing under a luster of beetle-back blue. The third: black glossy-harsh with spikes of strident ocher-yellow, and a scarlet tuft at the center. The fourth: a dozen concentric rings of small petals, in turn white, red and blue.

Melancthe asked no price. She tossed down four golden crowns. “When will you have more of these blooms?”

Yossip at once saw how the wind blew. Zuck had been deceitful by an order of magnitude larger than Yossip had imagined. Still, whether for good or for bad, he could not be punished a second

time. Yossip reflected. “Tomorrow, lady, I may have more flowers.”

“Remember, they must be reserved for me alone! I am fascinated by their bizarre complication!”

Yossip said smoothly: “To ensure yourself full ownership, I advise that you pay over at this moment a sufficiency of gold coins; otherwise someone may be quicker than you tomorrow morning.”

Melanthe contemptuously flung down five more crowns of yellow gold, and the transaction was thereby validated.

Dusk fell over the meadow. Lamps hung

in the trees and a variety of folk who preferred night to day came to stroll among the booths and to chaffer for articles which aroused their interest.

At the inn Melancthe dined modestly upon a chicken wing and a turnip cooked with honey and butter. She sat with her flowers set out in four vases, that she might admire each in turn, or all together, as she chose.

A saturnine dark-haired gentleman in splendid garments, distinguished by a neat mustache, a small beard, and keen features, approached her table. He bowed, doffed his hat, and without further ceremony seated himself.

Melancthe, recognizing Tamurello, made no comment. He inspected the flowers with curiosity. “Most fascinating, and, I would think, unique! Where do such extraordinary blossoms grow?”

“As to that, I cannot be sure,” said Melancthe. “I buy them from a booth at the fair. Smell, them, one after the other. Each is different; each purports with its odor an entire cascade of meaning, and meanings of meanings; each is a whole pageant of subtle and nameless aromas.”

Tamurello smelled each bloom in turn, and then each once again. He looked at them with lips pursed. “The odors are exquisite. I am reminded of something to

which I cannot now put a name... . The thought hangs in a far comer of my mind and refuses to stir. A maddening sensation!”

“You will recognize it presently,” said Melanthe. “Why are you here, where you come so rarely?”

“I am here by curiosity,” said Tamurello. “Only a few moments ago there was a tremble at Twitten’s Post. It might mean much, or it might mean little, but such a tremble is always worth the investigation... . Aha! Look then, who has just entered the inn! It is Visbhume, and I must confer with him at once.”

Visbhume stood by the counter, looking this way and that for Hockshank, who at this moment was busy elsewhere.

Tamurello went to stand beside him.

“Visbhume, what do you do here?”

Visbhume peered at the black-bearded grandee who addressed him so familiarly. “Sir, you have the advantage of me.”

“I am Tamurello, in a guise I often use while going abroad.”

“Of course! Now I recognize you, by the clarity of your gaze! Tamurello, it is a pleasure to see you!”

“Thank you. What brings you here at this season?”

Visbhume puffed out his cheeks and gave his forefinger a wag. “Now then, who can explain the foibles of a vagabond? One day here, the next day there! Sometimes the way is rude, sometimes it is rough, and sometimes one must tramp onward through the rain and the dark compelled only by the gleam of one’s own far star! But for now, I wish only for Hockshank, that he may find me a comfortable chamber for the night.”

“Your wants will not be satisfied, or so I fear. The inn is full.”



Visbhume's face fell. "In that case I must find a tuft of hay in the barn."

"Unnecessary! Step outside a moment."

Somewhat reluctantly Visbhume followed Tamurello out the door and into the road. Tamurello looked up into the sky. He pointed aloft to where the moonlight shone on a floating manse of three towers, a terrace and a surrounding balustrade.

"That is where I shall take my rest this night," said Tamurello. "But before I say more, I am curious as to why you are here when you were on last accounts hard at work in the service of King

Casmir, upon my recommendation.”

“True, true! With your usual acuity you understand the exact state of affairs! I believe that I will now take a bite of supper. If you will excuse me-”

“In a moment,” said Tamurello. “Tell me, how went your business with Casmir?”

“Tolerably well.”

“He is pleased with your information?”

“In truth, I have not yet reported to him. The knowledge I have gained is so footling that I may not even trouble to do

so.”

“What, in fact, did you learn?”

“Sir, I feel that I should best retain these few trivialities for Casmir’s ears.”

“Forsooth, Visbhume! Surely you have no secrets from me?”

“All of us have our little areas of privacy,” said Visbhume primly.

“In some areas and at some times and with certain persons,” stated Tamurello.  
“Not at Twitten’s Corners by moonlight, in converse with Tamurello.”

Visbhume made nervous flourishes of

the hand. “Well then, if you insist, you shall know.” And Visbhume added heartily: “After all, who referred me to Casmir but my good friend Tamurello?”

“Exactly so.”

“I learned this much. Casmir is troubled by a prediction in regard to Suldrun’s first-born son.”

“I know of this prediction, by Persilian the Mirror. I know of Casmir’s concern.”

“The fact is simple yet most poignant! Suldrun’s first-born son was sired by Aillas, King of Troicinet. The son’s

name is Dhrun, and in one year at the fairy shee he attained the age of nine Earthly years.”

“Interesting!” said Tamurello. “And how did you come by this information?”

“I worked with vast toil and cunning. I took Glyneth to the world Tanjecterly, and there I would easily have had the knowledge had not Shimrod sent down a great monster to harass me. But I am nothing if not indomitable; I gained my information, I killed the beast, and I came up from Tanjecterly with my information.”

“And the Princess Glyneth?”

“She remains in Tanjecterly, where she cannot tell tales.”

“A wise precaution there! You are right! Knowledge of this sort is best kept secret, and reserved to the fewest possible number of minds. Indeed, Visbhume, one mind is enough, for knowledge of this sort.”

Visbhume drew back a step. “Two minds are quite as secure.”

“I fear not. Visbhume-”

“Hold!” cried Visbhume. “Have you forgotten my loyalty? My relentless efficiency? My aptitude for performing

impossible services?”

Tamurello considered. “These arguments carry genuine weight! You are both loquacious and cogent, and so you have earned your life. Henceforth, however ...” Tamurello made a gesture and uttered a phrase. Visbhume’s garments slumped to the ground. From the dark tumble crawled a black and green snake. It hissed once at Tamurello and darted away into the forest.

Tamurello stood quiet in the road, listening to the sounds from within the inn: the mutter of voices, the clink of glass and earthenware, Hockshank’s occasional call to his serving boy.

Tamurello's thoughts went for a moment to Melanthe. Her flowers, for a fact, were intriguing; he would explore them further in the morning. As for the attractions of Melanthe's person, his moods were ambiguous and to a certain degree defensive. He had been the lover of her brother; now she showed him a cool half-smiling detachment, in which Tamurello often thought to sense the flavor of contempt.

Tamurello listened a final moment to the sounds from the inn, glanced toward the forest, where he knew a black and green snake watched him with passionate eyes. Tamurello chuckled for the sheer logic of the situation, then held his arms wide,



fluttered his fingers and was wafted high through the moonlight to his floating manse.

Five minutes later Shimrod appeared in the road. Like Tamurello he paused a moment to listen, then, hearing nothing but sounds from within, he entered the inn.

## II

SHIMROD WENT TO THE COUNTER, and Hockshank leaned forward to attend his wants. "Again, Sir Shimrod, I am filled to capacity; still I notice that the beautiful Dame Melancthe again visits the fair and already has

bought a fine bouquet which is the envy of everyone. Perhaps she might again share her accommodations with a dear and trusted friend.”

“Or even with a total stranger, should the mood be on her. Well, we shall see. Tonight I came prepared and in fact I have no need for her hospitality. Still, who knows how the evening will go? In the name of gallantry, I will at least pay my respects and possibly take a cup of wine with her.”

“Have you dined?” asked Hockshank.  
“Tonight the civet of hare is tasty, and my woodcocks are beyond reproach. Hear how they sizzle on the spit!”

“You have tempted me,” said Shimrod.  
“I will test one of the woodcocks, along with half a crusty loaf.”

Shimrod joined Melancthe at her table. She said: “Only minutes ago Tamurello sat in that very chair and admired these same flowers. Is this the reason for your presence?”

“The flowers, no. Tamurello, perhaps. Murgan sent me to investigate a tremble of Twitten’s Post.”

“Twitten’s Post is all the rage,” said Melancthe. “Tamurello came at the same tremble.”

Shimrod looked around the room. “His guise must be unusual; I see no one here who might be Tamurello, unless it is yonder youth with the copper ringlets and the green jade eardrops.”

“Tonight Tamurello is an austere grandee, but he is not here. He noticed his crony, Visbhume, and took him outside, and neither has returned.”

Shimrod strove to keep his voice casual. “How long ago was this?”

“Minutes only.” Melanthe held up one of her flowers. “Is this not glorious? It quivers with the very essence of its being; it tells a provocation for

something I cannot even surmise! See how the colours glow against each other! The odor is intoxicating!”

“Yes, perhaps so.” Shimrod jumped to his feet. “I will be back in a few moments.”

Shimrod left the inn and went out into the road. He looked right and left; no one was in sight. He cocked his head to listen, but only sounds from within the inn came to his ear. He walked quietly to Twitten’s Corners; he looked north, east, south and west; the four roads stretched away from the crossing, empty and pale in the moonlight, with trees standing somber to the side.

Shimrod returned toward the inn. To the side of the road, half in the ditch, he noticed a tumble of clothes. Shimrod approached slowly. He knelt and so discovered a tall gray book with a golden rod engaged in the web.

Shimrod took the book to the light streaming from the windows of the inn and read the title. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small silver bell, which he tapped with his fingernail.

A voice spoke. "I am here."

"I am standing beside the inn at Twitten's Corners. Just before I arrived Visbhume came into the inn. If the post

trembled, he was the cause. Tamurello met him and took him outside. I fear that Visbhume is gone: either dead or dissipated. He left behind his garments and his ‘Twitten’s Almanac’, which now I hold in my possession.”

“And Tamurello?”

Shimrod, raising his eyes, saw Tamurello’s manse silhouetted across the moon. “He has brought a floating castle; I see it now in the sky.”

“I will come, but early in the morning. Meanwhile, take full precautions! Do nothing at Melancthe’s behest, no matter how innocent! Tamurello’s mood is

reckless; he suffered at Khambaste and now he learns that he has gained nothing. He is ready to perform any act, be it desperate or irrevocable, or merely tragic. Be wary.”

Shimrod returned inside the inn. Melancthe, for whatever reason, had departed.

Shimrod consumed his supper and for a period sat watching the folk of the forest at their revels. At last he went outside, and going to a nearby clearing put down a miniature cottage much like the one Visbhume had carried in his wallet.

“House, grow large!” said Shimrod.



He went to stand on the porch.

“House, stand tall!”

The house grew cabriolet legs at the corners, each terminating in claws grasping a ball, so that the house stood at a secure height of sixty feet above the clearing.

The night passed and dawn came to the Forest of Tantrevalles. As the sun raised above the trees, Shimrod came out on his porch. “Down, house!” called Shimrod, and then: “House, grow small!”

Tamurello’s manse still floated in the sky. Shimrod went into the inn and made

his breakfast.

Melancthe came quietly into the room, demure as a young shepherdess of Arcady in her knee-length white frock and sandals. She paid Shimrod no heed, and went to sit in an inconspicuous corner, which suited Shimrod very well.

Melancthe wasted little time at her breakfast. Departing the inn, she went to the meadow where the fair was already in full progress.

Shimrod followed casually behind her. As she entered the meadow he joined her side. “What do you look for today?”

“I have a whole bouquet of flowers on order,” Melanthe told him. “These blooms are now my fascination; I dote upon them!”

Shimrod laughed. “Is it not strange that they work so strong an influence upon you? Do you not fear falling under an enchantment?”

Melanthe gave him a startled sideglance. “What enchantment could it be, save the force of sheer beauty? They are my dearest loves! Their colours sing to me; their perfumes bring me dreams!”

“Pleasant dreams, I hope? Some of the odors are remarkably rank.”

Melancthe showed him one of her rare smiles. “The dreams are various. Some are most surprising. Some, I suspect, might exceed the limits of your imagination.”

“No doubt whatever! I am denied such ecstasies by my mean and paltry soul.” Shimrod looked around the meadow. “Where is this merchant of dreams?”

Melancthe pointed. “Just there! I see Yossip, but where are my lovely flowers? No doubt he has put them aside for me.”

Melancthe ran to the booth. “Yossip, good morning to you, and where is my

bouquet?”

Yossip shook his head mournfully. “Lady, in this case the truth is more simple, more elemental and more convincing than any lie. I will tell you the full and exact truth. This morning when I went to cut flowers, I came upon a grievous sight! Each plant had fallen and died, as if ravaged by the blight! There are no more plants! There are no more flowers!”

Melanthe stood rigid. “How is it possible?” she whispered. “Must it always be thus? That when I have found something sweet and dear it is taken from me? Yossip, how can you be so

cruel? All night long I have pined for these flowers!”

Yossip gave a shrug. “Truly, lady, the fault is not mine, and therefore the coins you paid over to me should not be returned.”

Shimrod said: “Yossip, allow me to cite the first principle of business ethics. If you give nothing of value, then you may not expect payment, regardless of all else. I speak only as a disinterested spectator.”

Yossip cried out: “I cannot give up so much good gold! My plants have been destroyed; I deserve pity, not new

strokes of misfortune! Let the lady select elsewhere from among my treasures! I hold nothing back! Here is an absolute prize: a black pebble dredged from the bottom of the River Styx! And observe this touching scene of a child caressing his mother, done in a mosaic of birds' eyes in gum. I stock a good selection of amulets all of great power, and this magic bronze comb invigorates the hair, repels infestations and cures scabies. These are all valuable articles!"

"I want none of them," said Melanthe crossly. "Still- let me look at that green gem you have on display."

Yossip hissed between his teeth, and

reluctantly brought down the shallow box in which reposed the green pearl. “I am not so sure that I wish to part with this exquisite object.”

“Come then! You yourself declared that nothing was held back! These gentlemen will testify to your word!” She indicated Shimrod and two or three others who had paused to watch the altercation.

“Again, as a disinterested spectator, I must corroborate Melanthe’s statement,” said Shimrod. He spoke in an abstracted voice, in search of a memory which for the moment evaded him. Somewhere he had encountered news of a green pearl, but the context



evaded him. The green pearl, so he recalled, had been some sort of evil token.

“I as well!” declared a florid young peasant with yellow hair caught under the dark green cap of a woodcutter. “I know nothing of the case but I will avouch the hearing of my two good ears.”

“So then!” said Melancthe in triumph. “Bring the box closer so that I may see the pearl.”

Yossip angrily brought down the box and held it so that Melancthe was afforded barely a glimpse at the pearl. In

a surly voice Yossip told her: “This gem is worth ten times the gold you paid me; I cannot let it go on the cheap!”

Melancthe leaned and craned her neck that she might see more readily into the box. “It is extraordinary!” she breathed, her flowers now forgotten. She reached to take up the gem, but Yossip jerked back the box.

“Come now!” demanded Melancthe. “Is this proper conduct for a huckster? To proffer, to allow a glimpse, then to snatch away the merchandise as if the customer were a robber? Where is your master, Zuck? He will not be pleased with such conduct!”

Yossip winced and grimaced in confusion. “Never mind about Zuck; he has given me full discretion.”

“Then show me the pearl, or I will call for the steward and these two gentlemen shall be my witnesses!”

“Bah!” grumbled Yossip. “Such intimidation is only a step removed from robbery itself. Can you blame me for not trusting you with the gem?”

“Either the gem or my gold coins!”

“The gem is worth far more! First let us agree to that!”

“Perhaps a trifle more.”

Reluctantly Yossip allowed Melanthe the box. She stared down entranced.

“The colour envelops me with its fervor! How much more do you ask?”

Yossip had still not recovered his equanimity. “Truth to tell, I have not yet determined its value. This jewel might readily grace the King of Araby’s crown!”

Melanthe turned to Shimrod, with arch mischief in her face. “Shimrod, what is your opinion of the jewel?”

“It is handsome, if somewhat baleful,”

said Shimrod. “Somewhere I have heard rumors of a similar jewel, perhaps in a fabulous legend; I cannot remember the occasion. I recall nothing good to be said for the pearl. It was worn by a Bloodthirsty pirate.”

“Shimrod! Dear cautious, good, mild-mannered Shimrod! Does the legend so perturb you, when you have hardly glanced at the pearl itself?” She extended him the box. “At least give me your estimate of its value.”

“I am hardly an expert!”

“In such matters everyone is an expert, since he knows what he would pay for

it.”

“I would give nothing.”

“For once behave like an ordinary man! Take it up and feel its heft! Study the surface for flaws; gauge the subtlety of its seagreen fire.”

Shimrod took the box and looked down sidelong. “It shows no obvious flaws. The colour has an envious malignant overtone.”

Melanthe was still dissatisfied. “Why are you so diffident? Look at it from all sides! I want only your best and truest judgment.”

Shimrod reluctantly reached to take the pearl, but his elbow was seized by the florid young peasant with yellow hair. “Shimrod, a word with you aside about this pearl.”

Shimrod placed the box back on the counter; the two went a little apart and the young peasant spoke in an edged voice: “Did I not warn you against Melancthe’s behests? Do not touch the pearl! It is a node of pure depravity, nothing more.”

“Of course! Now I remember! Tristano told us a tale of such a pearl! But Melancthe can know nothing of this!”

“Perhaps a voice talks into her inner ear... . Tamurello is coming into the meadow; I do not want to be recognized. Tax him strongly for news of Visbhume! Under no circumstances touch the pearl!” The peasant mingled with the crowd.

Subdued and crestfallen, Shimrod went back to Melanthe. He muttered into her ear: “The fellow has some knowledge of pearls and tells me that this object is not a true pearl, since true pearls are never green. I now remember the rumor. Do not touch this false pearl as you value your soul; it is worse than worthless; it is a whorl of depravity.”



Melancthe cried out in a low voice: “I have never been so affected before! It seems to sing to me, in a haunting music!”

“Still, if you have never believed me before, believe me now! Despite all your treacheries, I would not have you come to harm.”

From his post behind the booth Yossip stated grandly: “I have calculated the worth of this glorious jewel: one hundred gold crowns exactly!”

Shimrod spoke harshly: “The Lady Melancthe does not want the thing at any price. Return her coins at once.”

Melancthe stood limp and silent with mouth drooping; when Yossip, glaring sidelong at Shimrod, paid out the five gold coins, she dropped them into her wallet without giving them a glance.

Tamurello, in the same guise as of the night before, halted and gave Shimrod a polite salute. "I am surprised to find you so far from Trilda! Have you lost all interest in my affairs?"

"Other matters occasionally intrude upon my attention," said Shimrod. "At the moment I want a few words with Visbhume. You saw him last night; where is he now?"

Tamurello smilingly shook his head. “He went his way, I went mine; I know nothing of his present locality.”

“Why not alter the habits of a lifetime and speak with candor?” asked Shimrod. “Truth, after all, need not be only the tactic of last resort.”

“Ah, Shimrod! I am concerned by your negative opinion! In regard to Visbhume, I have nothing to hide. I spoke to him last night, then we parted company. I can offer no insights as to his plans.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Hm hah! I fear that we verge close upon

the question of confidentiality! Still, I will tell what I know. He reported that he had only just arrived from Tanjecterly, which is one of Twitten's 'Dekadiade', as perhaps you know."

"Something to this effect has reached me. Did he mention the Princess Glyneth? What were his reports of her?"

"In this regard he was somewhat evasive, and I infer that she came to an unhappy end. Tanjecterly is a cruel domain."

"He was not specific in this regard?"

"Not altogether. In fact, his intent was to

tell me as little as possible.”

“While in your presence did he discard all his clothing, for reasons totally beyond my conjecture?”

“What a startling idea!” declared Tamurello, in mild reproach. “The images which you place before my mind’s eye are deplorable!”

“Most odd! Last night I came upon his garments in a heap at the side of the road.”

Tamurello gave his head a bland shake, “Often, in cases of this sort, the simple explanation is ignored or overlooked.

Perhaps he merely exchanged his soiled and travel-worn garments for others more presentable.”

“Would he discard his valuable copy of Twitten’s Almanac along with the soiled clothes?”

Tamurello, caught offguard, arched his sardonic eyebrows high and stroked his neat black beard. “One can only suspect him of absentmindedness, or vagary. But of course I cannot presume knowledge of Visbhume’s quirks. Now, please excuse me.”

Tamurello turned to Melancthe. “And what have you found of interest?”

“Here is where I found my flowers, but now the plants are dead, and I will never know their charm again.”

“A pity.” Glancing into the booth, Tamurello caught sight of the green pearl. He became instantly rigid, then advanced step by slow step, to bend his head down over the box.

“It is a green glory, a nonpareil!” declared Yossip in excitement. “The price? A trifling hundred gold coins!”

Tamurello paid no heed. He reached out his hand; his fingers fluttered down upon the pearl. From the shadows at the end of the counter a green and black snake

lunged forth. It seized the pearl in its mouth and gulped it down in a trice, then slid back across the counter, down to the ground and away into the forest.

Tamurello gave a choked cry and ran around the booth, in time to see the snake slide into a hole between the roots of a gnarled old oak.

Tamurello clenched his hands, cried out a spell of six syllables and transformed himself into a long gray weasel which darted into the hole after the snake.

From below ground came faint squeaks and hisses: then silence.



A minute passed. Up from the hole came the weasel carrying the green pearl in its mouth. For an instant it glared red-eyed across the meadow, then jerked into motion and started to bound away.

A florid young peasant with flaxen hair moved even more quickly. He clapped a glass jar over the weasel and fixed tight the lid, compressing the weasel down upon its haunches, where it sat, the green pearl firmly in its mouth, the long nose pushed down on its belly, and its hind legs thrust up past its ears.

The peasant put the jar on the counter of Yossip's booth, and as the group watched, the weasel dissolved into a

green transparency, like a skeleton in aspic, with the pearl glowing green at its center.

### III

THE GRAY CRUMBLE OF THE ASPHRODISKE SKYUNE became lost in the haze astern, as the wole ran to the west: away from the black moon, back across the Plain of Lilies. Overhead the yellow sun and the green sun circled each other with a languid incessant inevitability, which Glyneth thought might ultimately disturb a person of erratic disposition, and which, if the truth be known, she herself found

unpleasant, now that she had time to brood.

With Visbhume's departure, the tension along taut nerves had suddenly loosened, and the stimulation of Visbhume's mercurial, if odd, personality was gone, leaving a flat tired aftermath.

At the first halt Glyneth insisted that Kul rest and renew his strength. Kul, however, quickly became moody, and refused to lie quiet in the manner which Glyneth considered proper. "I feel trapped in this little house!" he growled. "When I lie still, staring up at the thatch, I feel like a corpse with his eyes open. I hear voices shouting as if from far

distances; as I lie idle the voices come wild and angry, and grow louder!”

“Still, you must recuperate,” Glyneth declared. “Therefore, rest is needful; nothing else will serve, since I dare not use Visbhume’s tonics on you at random.”

“I want none of Visbhume’s stuffs,” muttered Kul. “I feel better when we travel west; that is the command given into my mind, and I feel easy only when I obey.”

“Very well then,” said Glyneth. “We shall travel, but you must sit quietly and let me nurse you. I do not know what I

would do if you sickened and died.”

“Yes, that would be most tragic,” Kul agreed. He sat up from the couch. “Let us be on our way. I feel better already!” Once again the wole ran westward. Kul’s spirits improved and he began to show traces of his old vitality.

The Plain of Lilies fell behind, and the Dark Woods, and presently the town Pude appeared in the distance. Kul took up Zaxa’s two-handed sword Zil and went to stand in front of the pergola, legs apart and the point of the sword between his feet. On the high bench Glyneth arranged the blow-tube and the fire-mites, and made sure that the Tormentor

bulbs were ready to hand.

Entering Pude, the wole cantered down the center of the main street, while folk peered down through the windows of their tall crabbed houses. No one came out to challenge their passage, and they crossed the bridge without a thought for the payment of toll.

With the River Haroo safely to the rear, Glyneth gave a nervous laugh. “We are not popular in Pude. The children did not bring us flowers and there was no trace of a celebration. Even the dogs refused to bark and the mayor hid under his bed.”

Kul looked back with a grim smile. "To my great relief, since I too would like to hide and skulk. If the children struck me with a single flower petal I would fall flat; I lean on this sword to hold myself erect; I doubt if I could lift it to strike a blow if Visbhume's neck itself were the target."

"Why stand there then? Sit down and rest! Think strong and hopeful thoughts and soon you will be as healthy as ever!" Kul limped back to the low bench. "We shall see."

Ahead lay the trackless Tang-Tang Steppe, and Glyneth began to fear that they might deviate from their course and

so lose their way. The only dependable landmark was the pink star in the east, but to keep this star directly astern was a difficult task, and the two continually searched for landmarks along the way. They passed through the region of vast trees; as before the half-human tree-dwellers issued hysterical threats and made offensive signs. Kul steered the wole so as to veer around the trees and took refuge in the pergola. "I wish to provoke no one, not even these miserable creatures."

"Poor Kul!" said Glyneth. "But do not fret; soon you will grow strong again, and you will no longer take such frights. Meanwhile you may rely on me, since I



have Visbhume's wallet ready to hand."

Kul made a growling noise in his throat.

"It has not quite come to that yet.

Though, for a fact, I am of little value."

Glyneth indignantly contradicted him.

"Of course you are of value, especially to me! We shall go slowly and give you time to rest."

"Not so! Have you watched the black moon? It is moving around the sky!

When we get to the hut, my work is done, and then I can rest."

Glyneth sighed. Such talk oppressed her. If she survived, she would never forget

these strange journeys across the world Tanjecterly, and perhaps the dreadful events would lose their force, while Kul's companionship, the rests at the pleasant little cottage and the wonderful landscapes of Tanjecterly would assert their charm, to which for the time being she was numb... . Could it be possible that she would leave Tanjecterly with regret? Assuming, of course, that she were to leave... . Glyneth sighed again and gave her attention to the countryside.

Travel, then rest, and travel again, and each cycle brought new events. On one occasion the wole barely evaded a stampede of eight-legged ruminants, the size of large boars, dappled red and

white with long tusks and tails ending in spiked knobs. Squealing, screaming, emitting a vile odor, the column of beasts a quarter-mile wide rushed past, from north to south, and finally disappeared.

Another time they passed by an encampment of swarthy human nomads, dressed in gaudy garments of black, yellow and red. Instantly scores of children ran out to beg, and the sight of Kul deterred them not at all. Glyneth had nothing to give them and they tore tassels from the wole's rug until Glyneth caused the wole to accelerate its pace and leave the encampment behind.

At this point Glyneth began to suspect that they had strayed from the most direct route across the steppe, and her suspicions were confirmed by the sight of two knolls, each crowned by a fortified castle, and, beyond, a crag of rock surmounted by a castle, even larger and more dire. As the wole ran past, a pair of enormous knights, each taller and more massive than Kul, rode down from the first two castles. One knight wore splendid purple armour with a crest of green plumes, while the other wore blue armour and orange plumes. They halted their steeds in front of the wole, and held up their arms in apparently amicable salute.

The purple knight asked: “Good gentlefolk, we extend our greetings and ask as to how and in what style you name yourselves?”

Glyneth responded from the top seat of the pergola. “I am, the Princess Glyneth of Troicinet, and this is my paladin Sir Kul.”

The blue knight said: “The place ‘Troicinet’ is unknown to us. Sir Kul, if I may say so, somewhat resembles a syaspic feroce, though his face, manner, and nobility of bearing, suggest the status you have ascribed to him.”

“You show discernment,” said Glyneth.

“Sir Kul is under an enchantment and must use his present guise for a certain period.”

“Aha!” declared the purple knight. “You have explained much.”

The blue knight said: “We also note that Sir Kul stands with hands enclasping a great sword of uncommon fabric. It is much like the sword Zil, carried by the murderer Zaxa of Pude Town.”

“True. Zaxa at one time wielded this sword, but he gave offense, and Sir Kul took both his life and his sword. It was a tedious exercise since Zaxa roared a great deal during his dying.”

The two knights examined Kul askance. They conferred together, then the blue knight, moving to the side, blew a great blast on his horn.

The purple knight meanwhile came to address Glyneth and Kul: "In view of your victory over Zaxa, we implore you to kill his father, Sir Lulie, as well. Lulie is stronger by far than Zaxa and we feel no shame in admitting our own fear of him. Lulie is guilty of a thousand horrid deeds, with never so much as a wince of remorse, much less an apology."

Glyneth said hastily: "We deplore such misdeeds, but now we have no time to

take action; in fact, we are already late for very important business.”

“Is that truly the case?” asked the purple knight. “Then it seems that my brother was premature in sounding the challenge.”

“Absolutely! We are now departing and you must explain to Sir Lulie as best you can. Kul, stir the wole to his best speed.”

“Too late,” called the purple knight. “I notice Sir Lulie riding down from his castle at this very moment.”

With a sinking heart Glyneth watched the



approach of Sir Lulie. He sat in a massive throne-like chair on a wole, and carried a lance forty feet long. He wore half-armour: a cuirass, greaves and a casque in the mold of a demon's head, with a crest of three black plumes.

Sir Lulie halted his steed at a distance of a hundred feet. He called out: "Who blew so brashly his horn, to disturb my rest? I am quite put out of sorts."

The blue knight spoke: "The horn was blown to announce the presence of invincible Sir Kul, who has already killed your son Zaxa and now wants to see the colour of your liver."

“That is a cruel ambition!” cried Lulie.  
“Sir Kul, why do you pursue such violent aims?”

“It seems to be my destiny,” muttered Kul. “In this case, however, you are a bereaved father and I relent. Go back to your castle with your grief, and we will proceed. Our best wishes to all; goodbye.”

The purple knight cried out: “Sir Kul, evidently you spoke in jest when you described Sir Lulie as ‘the dog of a dog’ and ‘a coward whose deeds stink even worse than Sir Lulie himself!’ “

Sir Lulie said: “I am not a sensitive

person, but these remarks carry a sting.”

Kul said: “Sir Lulie, your quarrel lies with yonder two knights, not me. Please excuse us from further conversation, as we are anxious to go our way.”

“Still, you have killed my son Zaxa, and you carry his sword. If nothing else, this deed calls for retribution.”

“I killed him when he attacked me. If you attack me, I will find some way to kill you.”

“Ha ha! I interpret that remark as a challenge.”

“It is not intended to be so. Please allow us to continue.”

“Not until all accounts are settled. Climb from your perch. We will fight afoot, and you shall swing Zaxa’s sword against his father, if you dare.”

Kul turned to Glyneth. “Do not stay for me. Fare west, Glyneth, at all speed, and may good luck go with you.”

Kul jumped down from the wole, carrying not Zaxa’s unwieldy weapon but his own short heavy sword. He advanced toward Sir Lulie with that lurching, forward-leaning gait characteristic to him.

Lulie drew his sword from the scabbard, and flourished it high. "Devil-beast, behold my sword Kahanthus! Your time has come!"

On the top seat of the pergola Glyneth inserted a fire-mite into the tube, aimed carefully and blew. The pellet, spreading and beating its wings, flew through the eye-hole in Lulie's casque and struck with an explosion of white fire. Lulie gave voice to a wild ululation and, dropping his sword, clawed at his helmet. Kul cut down on Lulie's elbow, so that the fore-arm dangled loose at the joint. Lulie kicked, more by reflex than intent, and sent Kul hurtling through the air, and when he struck the ground he lay

still. Lulie pulled away his casque and blinked here and there through his one remaining eye; he saw Kul and lunged down to choke him. Kul raised his sword and the point penetrated Lulie's neck under the chin and thrust up into the brain. Lulie slumped down upon Kul and the spike protruding from his cuirass stabbed Kul high in the chest.

Straining greatly, Glyneth rolled Lulie's corpse to the side. To staunch the red blood spurting from Kul's wound, she wadded a kerchief into the puncture, then ran to find Visbhume's wallet. She brought out the cake of wax and applied it in desperate haste. With the wound in Kul's chest finally staunched, Glyneth

found to her dismay that blood welled from the wound in his back where the point of the spike had emerged. The wounds in Kul's chest and back at last ceased to flow, but for a period Kul knelt with hanging head, coughing and spitting red foam from his lungs. At last he turned Glyneth a ghastly grin. "Once more I am well! Back to the wole; the black moon rolls!"

Kul rose swaying to his feet; with Glyneth's help he managed to clamber into the pergola, where he slumped heavily upon the bench.

The purple knight and the blue knight had long since departed, and now Glyneth

saw them riding up the road to Sir Lulie's castle, whether to claim Sir Lulie's treasures or to liberate his captives she could not guess.

Now Glyneth steeled herself and, gritting her teeth, she pulled Kul's sword from the corpse, and, after wiping it clean on Sir Lulie's garments, she carried it to the wole.

Sir Lulie's sword, Kahanthus, lay on the turf: a blade of pale blue metal and a handle fitted with plaques of carved ebony and terminating in a glowing red ruby cabochon. The sword was heavy; with an effort Glyneth lifted it to the wole's back. Glyneth climbed aboard



and once again the wole coursed into the west.

Kul slumped back with his eyes closed, his face pallid, his breath shallow and rasping from the blood still caught in his throat. Glyneth tried to make him comfortable, and sat close beside him, watching the flicker of expressions crossing his face. They became gradually more marked and more definite, and Glyneth began to feel eery chills at what she imagined she saw. At last she touched the gaunt cheek. “Kul! Wake up! You are dreaming bad dreams!”

Kul stirred. He groaned and drew

himself up into a sitting position.  
Glyneth anxiously searched his face; to her relief she saw only the Kul whom she loved and trusted.

Glyneth asked: “Do you remember your dreams?”

After a moment Kul said: “They are gone now. I do not want to remember them.”

“Perhaps we should stop to rest, until you feel stronger.”

“I need no rest. We must travel as far and as fast as we can.”

The wole ran on: league after league, across the blue grass. To the south a few two-legged wolves appeared from time to time, to appraise the wole and consult wisely among themselves, then to bound away through the trees.

Travel, rest, travel: across the Tang-Tang Steppe, a landscape whose aspect at last began to seem familiar. They passed the tall manse of the robber knight, whom Visbhume had tricked with his mirror; on this occasion no one came forth from the manse. Over the western horizon appeared the shadowy loom of mountains, and presently the River Mys swept down from the north to flow parallel to their course. The two-legged

wolves, which had kept warily apart, became joined by a new troop whose elders, gesturing toward the wole, seemed to counsel bolder tactics. The band gradually closed in to run on either side of the wole, and also at the rear. One darted close and tried to gnaw at one of the wole's legs; the wole kicked the creature forward and trampled it without losing the rhythm of its stride.

Wearily Kul rose to his feet and took up his sword, and for a space the wolves drew back. Then, deciding that Kul posed no instant menace, they returned to bound close alongside, while two jumped up on the rug behind the pergola. Glyneth was ready with the tube and

blew a fire-mite at the closest. It struck the creature's chest in a flash of blue and orange flame; the creature howled loud, and tumbled from the wole, to bounce here and there in wild convulsions.

Glyneth aimed the tube at the second wolf, but it sagely hopped to the ground and ran skipping to the side.

After a few minutes the wolves loped off to the south and gathering in a circle discussed tactics, with much nodding of long-nosed faces and snapping in and out of thin black tongues. Meanwhile, Kul urged the wole to its best speed, and ahead, where the mountains began to swell up from beside the river, stood the hut.

The wolves loped once again to the attack. In accordance with their plan, they came up on both sides of the wole and jumped up to throw themselves on Kul. He chopped with his sword, hacking at reaching sucker-arms and heads, and cleared the space to the right, only to find the wolves surging upon his back from the left. Glyneth sent down fire-mite after fire-mite, until over the top of the pergola came a hairy arm to seize her around the neck, and a grinning long-nosed face looked closely into hers. She gasped and tore herself free and blew a fire-mite into the black mouth, and the creature departed, now concerned only with its own woeful

destiny.

The hut was only a hundred yards distant, but the wolves had pulled Kul from the wole, which came to a confused and trembling halt while the wolves crowded in upon Kul. Finally, they carried him down and seethed over him in a yelping furry mass.

Kul found strength; he heaved himself erect, to stand with sucker-arms clamped all over his body. Cursing and kicking, he tore himself free, then, lunging with his sword on high, seemed for a moment the Kul of old. But the wolves had tasted his blood and would not be denied. With snaps and yells they flung themselves

upon Kul; he hacked and slashed, but his strokes were drained of force. He called to Glyneth: “Set up your house; secure yourself! I am done.”

Glyneth looked frantically from side to side, then jumped to the ground and prepared to do Kul’s bidding.

In the doorway of the hut appeared a tall man with dust-blond hair. Glyneth looked up incredulously and her knees went limp with joy. “Shimrod!”

“The portal is open, but not for long. Come.”

“You must save Kul!”



Shimrod stepped out on the plain. He held up his hand; from his fingers came darts of black fire, which, striking the wolves, shrivelled them to wisps of gray ash. A few fled shrieking to the east; the black darts followed them and struck them down one by one, and all were gone.

Glyneth ran to Kul and tried to support his swaying form. “Kul! We are saved! Shimrod has come!”

Kul looked around with dull eyes. He croaked: “Shimrod, I have done your bidding, to my best ability.”

“Kul, you have done well.”

“In truth, I am already dead; now I will lie down and become still.” Kul sank to his knees.

Glyneth cried out: “Kul, do not die! Shimrod will make you strong again!”

Kul spoke huskily: “Dear Glyneth, go back to Earth. I cannot come with you. I am a motley thing, held together with red blood, and now all my blood is gone. Glyneth, goodbye.”

Glyneth raved: “Kul, only a few moments more! Do not die! I love you dearly and I cannot leave you here! Kul? Can you speak?”

Shimrod took her arm and raised her to her feet. “Glyneth, it is time to go. You cannot help Kul; he is about to return to his matrices and it is better that you come with me. Kul’s body is dead but his love for you is very much alive. Come.”

## IV

SHIMROD LED GLYNETH TO THE HUT. She halted. “On the wole are two great swords; please, Shimrod, bring them with us.”

Shimrod led her to the door. “Go through the gate. I will go for the swords. But do

not go out; wait for me in the hut.”

Numbly Glyneth stepped through the door and entered the hut. For an instant she looked back over her shoulder toward Kul. After a single glimpse she turned her head away.

Something was different. She breathed deeply. This was the air of Earth; it carried the beloved odor of her own foliage and her own soil.

Shimrod came into the hut, staggering under the weight of the two swords. He laid them upon the table and, turning to Glyneth, took her hands. “You loved Kul, and properly so; had you not I

would think you heartless and unnatural, which is foolishness since I know your loving nature too well. Kul was a magical being, constructed from two patterns: the syaspic feroce and a barbarian pirate from a far moon, named Kul the Killer. These two patterns, superimposed, made a terrible creature, relentless and indomitable. To give it life, and a soul, with love and loyalty for you, we gave it the blood of someone who loves you. Indeed, he gave almost all his blood and also the whole strength of his soul. Kul is dead but these are alive.”

Glyneth, crying and smiling at the same time, asked: “And who was this person

who loves me? Am I to know? Or must I guess?"

"I doubt if you need to guess."

Glyneth looked at him sidelong. "You love me and Dhrun loves me, but I think that you are speaking of Aillas. ... Is he outside?"

"No. I gave him no hint that the quaver was open. If you were not at the hut or if you had come to harm, he would only be tortured all over again. Kul did not fail and Murgan did not fail; and you are here. Now I will bring Aillas here by magic. You may come out when I call you."

Shimrod departed the hut. Glyneth went to the table and looked down upon the swords Zil and Kahanthus, and her mind went back to Tanjecterly and the long way to Asphrodiske. For a moment she wondered as to Visbhume.

A minute passed. From outside she heard voices, and started to go out, then, remembering Shimrod's instructions, waited.

Shimrod called: "Glyneth! Are you there? Or have you gone back to Tanjecterly?"

Glyneth went to the door and into the dappled sunlight of the forest. Beside a

carriage Aillas waited for her.

Shimrod carried the swords to the carriage and said: “I will await you at Watershade; do not loiter along the way!” He went off through the forest and was gone.

Aillas came forward and took Glyneth in his arms. “My beloved Glyneth, I will never let you leave me again.”

After a moment he released her and looked carefully into her face.

Glyneth, smiling, asked: “Why do you look at me so?”



“Because under my very eyes you have become the most beautiful and appealing of all maidens alive.”

“Truly, Aillas? Despite my soiled clothes and dirty face?”

“Truly.”

Glyneth laughed. “Sometimes I despaired of attracting your attention.”

“No fear of that now. In fact I am afflicted with all the tremors and doubts of the uncertain lover. I am anxious to learn of your adventures. How did your paladin Kul serve you?”

“He served me so well that I came to love him too! I should say, I came to love that part of Kul which was you. I saw glimpses of the feroce and of Kul the Killer and both frightened me; and then always you seemed to appear and set things right.”

Aillas said ruefully: “I seem to have done much which I do not remember. . . . Well, no matter. Kul brought you back to me, so I must not be jealous. Here is our carriage. Let us be away to Watershade, and the happiest banquets the old stones have ever known.”

# Epilogue

THE GREEN PEARL is locked in a bottle and Tamurello's guise, the skeleton of a crouching weasel in green aspic, is probably the least comfortable of any he has yet known... . The Forest of Tantrevalles shades a deep dank soil; somewhere under this mold lies the carcass of a snake which in better times used the name Visbhume; he no longer tippety-taps and moves and jerks to the rhythms of a propulsive inner music; and sometimes one wonders in cases like this: here is the dead thing; where has the music gone?

Tamurello and Visbhume are extraordinary folk, beyond a doubt, and both have come to grief. Still, the Elder Isles abound with remarkable folk, whose ambitions often transcend the advisable and sometimes even the possible.

As an example the Ska renegade Torqual might be cited. He has survived his wounds and now mends his strength in his inaccessible castle. Here he thinks bitter thoughts and forms gloomy plots, and he has vowed revenge upon the young Troice warrior who worked such grievous mischief upon him.

Queen Sollace of Lyonesse fervently

hopes to build a cathedral. Father Umphred assures her that if King Casmir were converted to Christianity, he might be more sympathetic to the cathedral. Queen Sollace agrees, but how to convert King Casmir? Perhaps with the aid of some holy relic. Several centuries before, Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail down to the Elder Isles from Glastonbury Abbey; for Queen Soilace's purposes the Holy Grail would serve very well, and Father Umphred enthusiastically agrees.

King Casmir is still perturbed by the prediction of Persilian the Magic Mirror and still lacks knowledge as to the identity of Suldrun's first-born son.

The Princess Madouc of Lyonesse occupies an unenviable position. King Casmir knows her to be a changeling, with none of his blood flowing in her veins. Still, she may serve him some useful purpose when she reaches marriageable age. Madouc, by the very nature of things, is a strange little creature, with even less patience than the tragic Princess Suldrun for the conventions of the court at Haidion.

# Glossaries

## Glossary I

THE ELDER ISLES during the course of ten thousand years had known incursions, migrations, armed invasion, as well as the coming and going of traders to their commercial depots, at Ys, Avallon, Domreis and Bulmer Skeme: all founded by foreign traders.

From every direction came the newcomers: pre-glacial folk with identities lost to history; what indigenes they discovered can only be a matter of speculation. Later came Kornutians,

Bithynians, a remarkable folk known as the Golden Khaz, and presently contingents of Escquahar (precursors elsewhere to the Basques, the Berbers of Morocco, the Guanches of the Canary Islands, and the Blue Men of Mauretania).

Then later, and sometimes in a succession of waves: Pelasgians, blond Sarsele from Tingitana, Danaans and Galicians from Spain, Greeks from Hellas, Sicily and Low Gaul; a few shiploads of Lydians turned away from Tuscany; Celts from all directions under a host of names; and in due course Romans from Aquitania, who toyed with the idea of conquest but presently



departed, taking with them the Christian doxology. A few Goths and Armoricans settled along the shores of Wysrod, while new bands of Celts from Britain and Ireland took advantage of weak Daut rulers to establish the Kingdom of Godelia. Finally, from Norway by way of Ireland<sup>21</sup> came the Ska, who settled on Skaghane and other of the Outer Isles, from which they moved into North Ulfland.

## **Glossary II**

THE HISTORY OF THE SKA was an epic in itself. Originally the indigenous inhabitants of Norway since before the

ice-age, they were expelled by invading Aryan Ur-Goths and driven south to Ireland where they entered Irish history as the Nemedians.

The Ur-goths, now supreme in Scandinavia, adopted Ska folk-ways and in due course sent hordes back into Europe: Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Gepids, Lombards, Angles, Saxons, and other German tribes. Those who remained in Scandinavia called themselves ‘Vikings’ and using boats built after the Ska designs, ranged the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the navigable rivers of Europe.

The Ska, defeated in Ireland by the

Fomorians, again were compelled to migrate. They sailed south from Ireland to Skaghane, westernmost of the Elder Isles, where they found an environment much to their liking.

At a Grand Moot, they bound themselves by three great vows, which are basic to any understanding of the complex and contradictory Ska character:

First: Never again would the Ska be driven from their homeland. Second: The Ska were at war with all the world's peoples: so it had been demonstrated; so it was. Third: The blood of the Ska race ran pure.

Interbreeding with Otherling sub-folk

was a crime as abominable as treachery, cowardice or murder.

## **Glossary III**

AILLAS HAD BEEN THE LOVER of Casmir's daughter, Suldrun, and the father of their son, Dhrun, who had been taken by the fairies of Thripsey Shee and replaced with the half-fairy changeling who became the Princess Madouc of Lyonesse.

Happily for King Casmir's peace of mind, he knew nothing of these facts and so was mightily perplexed by the prophecy uttered by the magic mirror Persilian, to the effect that Suldrun's

first-born son before his death would sit on the throne Evandig and also in honour and authority at the Board of Notables, the ancient ‘Gairbra an Meadhan’-this table in fact, the model for the Round Table of King Arthur of Cornwall, still two generations in the future.

# Footnotes

1 The details are chronicled in LYONESSE 1: Suldrun's Garden.

2 See Glossary I

3 At the moment Troicinet and Lyonesse kept an uneasy peace, but only after an accommodation whereby Casmir undertook to build no warships which might challenge Troice control of the sea. Aillas had put his case to Casmir in these terms: "Your armies, with your Four hundred knights and multitude of soldiers, protect you well against our attack. If Lyonesse could bring these

troops to Dascinet or Troicinet. we would know mortal danger! Lyonesse cannot be allowed the means to land armies on our soil.

4 Shimrod, while wandering the Daul countryside as ‘Doctor Fidelius. Charlatan and Mender of Sore Knees’, had befriended a pair of vagabond children named Dhrun and Glyneth, and thereafter the three had traveled together. Across the years Shimrod had changed little. A long nose, crooked mouth and gaunt cheeks gave his face a drollcast; he retained his spare physique, pale gray eyes under half-closed lids, and as ever wore his light brown hair cut short in the peasant style. See LYONESSE 1:

## Suldrun's Garden.

5 Upon the death of South Ulfland's King Oriante, the crown devolved by a tortuous line of descent to King Aillas of Troicinet. King Casmir was taken by surprise: while he paced fuming back and forth in the Green Parlour at Haidion. Troice ships brought an expeditionary force to the jetties of Old Ys. This force reduced the terrible castle Tintzin Fyral, garrisoned the fort Kaul Bocach and so guarded South Ulfland from the ambitions of King Casmir.

6 An arrangement decidedly at odds with the dictates of rigorous etiquette,



inasmuch as the title ‘Princess’ which King Aillas had fixed upon Glyneth was honourific only. Aillas, partly from frivolity and partly from motives less easily defined, had in this case overruled his Chief Herald, and Glyneth, somewhat self-consciously wearing the diadem of a royal princess, and quite aware of the gossip being promulgated, sat beside Aillas, and presently began to enjoy herself.

7 See Glossary III.

8 Oldebor liked to style himself: ‘Chief Underchamberlain in Charge of Special Duties’.

9 Murgan's edict prohibited magicians from taking sides in secular conflicts. With minor exceptions, the magicians were pleased to obey the rule.

10 Surch: untranslatable into contemporary terms; generally: 'susurrations along the nerves', 'psychic abrasion', 'half-unnoticed or sublimated uneasiness in a mind already wary.' 'Surch' is the stuff of hunches and unreasoning fear.

11 Sandestin: a class of halfling which wizards employ to work their purposes. Many magical spells are effected through the force of a sandestin.

12 falloy: a variety of halfling. much like a fairy, but larger and far more gentle of disposition.

13 dreuhwy; from the ancient Welsh and untranslatable; approximately: a self-induced mood of moros eextra-human intensity, in which any grotesque excess of conduct is possible; full identification of self with the afflatus which drives the eerie, the weird, the terrible. The adepts of the >so-called 'Ninth Power' conceived of 'dreuhwy' as a condition of liberation, in which their force reached its culmination.

14 A Ska soldier feared one thing only, the disesteem of his fellows. He gained

civil advancement primarily through his military exploits, and fought each battle with total ferocity, which disheartened his adversaries even before the battle was joined. Withal, the Ska among themselves were a gentle and law-abiding people, who lived to the tenets of a unique and complicated culture, with a written history ten thousand years old, and traditions far older. Originally a small tribe which followed the retreating glaciers north, they became the true indigenes of Scandinavia, only to be at last thrust out by the Ur-Goths (later the Scandinavians and Vikings, who adopted many Ska traits and skills, including the Ska longboat). Ska traditions recalled battles with ‘cannibal

ogres'-evidently Neanderthal tribesmen-who, so they were assured, interbred with all other tribes of true men, so that only Ska were of pure human descent, and all others hybrids, soiled by the infusion of Neanderthal blood. For further background to the fascinating Ska psychology and history, see the glossary in LYONESSE I: Suldrun's Garden.

15 Stangle: the stuff of dead fairies, with implications of horror, calamity and putrefaction; a term to excite fear and disquiet among halflings, who prefer to think of themselves as immortal, though this is not altogether the case.

16 mordet: a fairy invocation, usually of

bad luck; a curse.

17 Untranslatable: curses in the pie-Celtic dialect of the Wysrod peasantry, who were renowned for their mouth-filling epithets. Scholars will note that in this particular dialect the elision of vowels is very far advanced.

18 Dhrun, or Tippet' as the fairies named him, lived at Thripsey Shee for something more than a single year, by mortal reckoning. Fairy time moves at a far faster flow, and to Dhrun's own perceptions he lived almost nine years at the shee. King Casmir, unaware of the discrepancy, puts Dhrun's age at five rather than his actual age of close to

fourteen.

**19** See LYONESSE 1: Suldrun's Garden, where the circumstances of Aillas' sojourn at Castle Sank are chronicled in detail.

**20** Torqual survived both his wounds and his fall. He managed to crawl to the trail, where he was rescued by a pair of his henchmen. They took him to Castle Ang where in due course he recovered his strength.

**21** See Glossary II. this book. Also see LYONESSE 1: Suldrun's Garden, Glossary III.

# Book III Madouc

## CHAPTER ONE

### I

South of Cornwall, north of Iberia, across the Cantabrian Gulf from Aquitaine were the Elder Isles, ranging in size from Gwyg's Fang, a jag of black rock most often awash under Atlantic breakers, to Hybras, the 'Hy-Brasill' of early Irish chroniclers: an island as large as Ireland itself.



On Hybras were three notable cities: Avallon, Lyonesse Town and ancient Ys,<sup>1</sup> along with many walled towns, old gray villages, castles of many turrets and manor houses in pleasant gardens.

The landscapes of Hybras were varied. The Teach tac Teach, a mountain range of high peaks and upland moors, paralleled the length of the Atlantic foreshore. Elsewhere the landscape was more gentle, with vistas over sunny downs, wooded knolls, meadows and rivers. A wild woods shrouded the entire center of Hybras. This was the Forest of Tantrevalles, itself the source of a thousand fables, where few folk ventured for fear of en chantment. The

few who did so, woodcutters and the like, walked with cautious steps, stopping often to listen. The breathless silence, broken, perhaps, by a far sweet bird call, was not reassuring in itself and soon they would stop to listen again.

In the depths of the forest, colors became richer and more intense; shadows were tinged with indigo or maroon; and who knows what might be watching from across the glade, or perched at the top of yonder stump?

The Elder Isles had known the coming and going of many peoples:  
Pharesmians, blue-eyed Evadnioi,  
Pelasgians with their maenad

priestesses, Danaans, Lydians, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Greeks, Celts from Gaul, Ska from Norway by way of Ireland, Romans, Celts from Ireland and a few Sea Goths. The wash of so many peoples had left behind a complex detritus: ruined strongholds; graves and tombs; steles carved with cryptic glyphs: songs, dances, turns of speech, fragments of dialect, placenames; ceremonies of purport now forgotten, but with lingering flavor. There were dozens of cults and religions, diverse except that in every case a caste of priests interceded between laity and divinity. At Ys, steps cut into the stone led down into the ocean to the temple of Atlante; each month in the dark of the moon priests

descended the steps by midnight, to emerge at dawn wearing garlands of sea flowers. On Dascinet, certain tribes were guided in their rites by cracks in sacred stones, which none but the priests could read. On Scola, the adjacent island, worshippers of the god Nyrene poured flasks of their own blood into each of four sacred rivers; the truly devout sometimes bled themselves pale. On Troicinet, the rituals of life and death were conducted in temples dedicated to the earth-goddess Gaea. Celts had wandered everywhere across the Elder Isles, leaving behind not only place names, but Druid sacrifices in sacred groves, and the 'March of the Trees'

during Beltane. Etruscan priests consecrated their an rogynous divinity Votumna with ceremonies repulsive and often horrid, while the Danaans introduced the more wholesome Aryan pantheon. With the Romans came Mithraism, Christianity, Parsh, the worship of Zoroaster, and a dozen other similar sects. In due course, Irish monks founded a Christian monastery<sup>2</sup> on Whanish Isle, near Dahaut below Avallon, which ultimately suffered the same fate as Lindisfarne far to the north, off the coast of Britain.

For many years the Elder Isles were ruled from Castle Haidion at Lyonesse Town, until Olam III, son of Fafion

Long Nose, removed the seat of government to Falu Ffail at Avallon, taking with him the sacred throne Evandig and the great table Cairbra an Meadhan, 'the Board of Notables' ,<sup>3</sup> and the source of a whole cycle of legends.

Upon the death of Olam III, the Elder Isles entered upon a time of troubles. The Ska, having been expelled from Ireland, settled on the island Skaghane, where they rebuffed all attempts to dislodge them. Goths ravaged the coast of Dahaut; sacking the Christian monastery on Whanish Isle, sailing their longboats up the Cambermouth as far as Cogstone Head, from which they briefly menaced Avallon itself. A dozen

princelings vied for power, shedding much blood, wreaking much grief and bereavement, exhausting the land, and in the end achieving nothing, so that the Elder Isles became a patchwork of eleven kingdoms, each at odds with all the rest.

Audry I, King of Dahaut, never abandoned his claim to sovereignty over all the Elder Isles, citing his custody of the throne Evandig as basis for his assertion. His claim was angrily challenged, especially by King Phristan of Lyonesse, who insisted that Evandig and Cairbra an Meadhan were his own rightful property, wrongfully sequestered by Olam III. He named Audry I traitor

and caitiff; in the end the two realms went to war. At the climactic battle of Orm Hill the two sides succeeded only in exhausting each other. Both Phristan and Audry I were killed, and finally the remnants of the two great armies straggled sadly away from the bloody field.

Audry II became king of Dahaut and Casmir I was the new king of Lyonesse. Neither abandoned the ancient claims, and peace between the two realms was thereafter fragile and tentative.

So went the years, with tranquillity only a memory. In the Forest of Tantrevalles halflings, trolls, ogres and others less



easily defined, bestirred themselves and performed evil deeds which no one dared punish; magicians no longer troubled to mask their identities, and were solicited by rulers for aid in the conduct of temporal policy.

The magicians devoted ever more time to sly struggles and baneful intrigue, to the effect that a goodly number had already been expunged. The sorcerer Sartzanek was one of the chief offenders; he had destroyed the magician Coddefut by means of a purulence, and Widdefut through the Spell of Total Enlightenment. In retaliation, a cabal of Sartzanek's enemies compressed him into an iron post which they emplaced at the summit

of Mount Agon. Sartzanek's scion Tamurello took refuge at his manse Faroli, deep within the Forest of Tantrevalles and there protected himself by dint of careful magic.

That further events of this sort might be avoided, Murgan, most potent of the magicians, issued his famous edict, forbidding magicians employment in the service of temporal rulers, inasmuch as such activity must inevitably bring magicians into new conflicts with each other, to the danger of all.

Two magicians, Snodbeth the Gay, so-called for his jingling bells, ribbons and merry quips, and Grundle of

Shaddarlost, were brash enough to ignore the edict, and each suffered a severe penalty for his presumption. Snodbeth was nailed into a tub to be devoured by a million small black insects; Grundle awoke from his sleep to find himself in a dismal region at the back of the star Achemar, among geysers of molten sulphur and clouds of blue fume; he too failed to survive.

Although the magicians were persuaded to restraint, travail and dissension elsewhere were rife. Celts who had been placidly settled in the Daut province Fer Aquila became inflamed by bands of Goidels from Ireland; they slaughtered all the Dauts they could find,

elevated a burly cattle thief named Meorghan the Bald to the kingship and renamed the land Godelia, and the Dauts were unable to recapture their lost province.

Years passed. One day, almost by chance, Murgan made a startling discovery, which caused him such vast consternation that for days he sat immobile, staring into space. By degrees his resolution returned and at last he set himself to a program which, if successful, would slow and finally halt the momentum of an evil destiny.

The effort preoccupied Murgan's energies and all but eliminated the joy in

his life. The better to guard his privacy, Murgen set out barriers of dissuasion along the approaches to Swer Smod, and, further, appointed a pair of demoniac gatekeepers, the better to turn back obstinate visitors; Swer Smod thereupon became a place of silence and gloom.

Murgen at last felt the need for some sort of alleviation. For this reason he brought into existence a scion, so that he might, in effect, live two existences in tandem. The scion, Shimrod, was created with great care, and was by no means a replica of Murgen, either in appearance or in temperament. Perhaps the differences were larger than Murgen had

intended, since Shimrod's disposition was at times a trifle too easy, so that it verged on the frivolous: a condition which was at discord with current conditions at Swer Smod. Murgan, nevertheless, cherished his scion and trained him in the skills of life and the arts of magic.

In the end Shimrod became restless and with Murgan's blessing he departed Swer Smod in all good cheer. For a period Shimrod wandered the Elder Isles as a vagabond, sometimes posing as a peasant, more often as a peregrine 'knight' in search of romantic adventure.

Shimrod at last settled into the manse

Trilda on Lally Meadow, a few miles into the Forest of Tantrevalles. In due course the Ska of Skaghane perfected their military apparatus and invaded North and South Ulfiand, only to be defeated by Aillas, the gallant young King of Troicinet, who there upon became King of both North and South Ulfiand, to the grievous distress of Casmir, King of Lyonesse.

Less than a dozen magicians remained extant throughout the Elder Isles. Some of these were Baibalides of Lamneth Isle; Noumique; Myolander; Triptomologius the Necromancer; Condoit of Conde; Severin Starfinder; Tif of the Troagh; and a few more,

including some who were little more than apprentices, or tyros. A goodly number of others had recently passed from existence - a fact suggesting that magic might be a dangerous profession. The witch Desmei for reasons unknown had dissolved herself during the creation of Faude Carfilhiot and Melanthe. Tamurello also had acted imprudently; now, in the semblance of a weasel skeleton he hung constricted within a small glass globe in Murgén's Great Hall at Swer Smód. The weasel skeleton crouched in a tight curl, skull thrust forward between the crotch formed by the upraised haunches, with two small black eyes glaring from the glass, conveying an almost palpable will to



work evil upon anyone who chanced to glance at the bottle.

## II

The most remote province of Dahaut was the March, governed by Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila - a title somewhat hollow, since the old Duchy of Fer Aquila had long been occupied by the Celts for their kingdom Godelia.

The March was a poor land, sparsely populated, with a single market town, Blantize. A few peasants tilled barley and herded sheep; in a few tumbled old

castles a ragtag gentry lived in little better case than the peasants, consoled only by their honour and devotion to the doctrines of chivalry. They ate more gruel than meat; draughts blew through their halls, flickering the flames in the wall sconces; at night ghosts walked the corridors, mourning old tragedies.

At the far west of the March was a wasteland supporting little but thorn, thistle, brown sedge and a few spinneys of stunted black cypress. The wasteland, which was known as the Plain of Shadows, met the outlying fringes of the great forest in the south, skirted the Squigh Mires in the north and to the west abutted the Long Dann, a scarp generally

three hundred feet high and fifty miles long, with the upland moors of North Ulfiand beyond. The single route from the plain below to the moors above led through a cleft in the Long Dann. During ancient times a fortress had been built into the cleft, closing the gap with stone blocks, so that the fortress effectively became part of the cliff. A sally port opened upon the plain, and high above a line of parapets fronted a terrace, or walkway. The Danaans had named the fortress 'Poëlitetz the Invulnerable'; it had never been taken by frontal assault. King Aillas of Troicinet had attacked from the rear, and so had dislodged the Ska from what had been their deepest salient into Hybras.

Aillas with his son Dhrun now stood on the parapets, looking out over the Plain of Shadows. The time was close upon noon; the sky was clear and blue; today the plain showed none of the fleeting cloud shadows which had prompted its name. Standing together, Aillas and Dhrun seemed much alike. Both were slender, square-shouldered, strong and quick by the action of sinew rather than massive muscle. Both stood at middle stature; both showed clear clean features, gray eyes and light brown hair. Dhrun was easier and more casual than Aillas, showing in his style the faintest hint of carefully restrained flamboyance, along with an indefinable light-hearted

elegance: qualities which gave charm and color to his personality.

Aillas, constrained by a hundred heavy responsibilities, was somewhat more still and reflective than Dhrun. His status required that he mask his natural passion and intensity behind a face of polite indifference: to such an extent that the trait had become almost habitual. Similarly, he often used a mildness close upon diffidence to disguise his true boldness, which was almost an extravagance of bravado. His swordsmanship was superb; his wit danced and flickered with the same sure delicacy, coming in sudden flashes like sunlight bursting through the clouds.

Such occasions transformed his face so that for a moment he seemed as youthful and jubilant as Dhrun himself.

Many folk, observing Aillas and Dhrun together, thought them to be brothers. When assured otherwise, they tended to wonder at Aillas' precocity in the fathering of his child. Dhrun, in point of fact, had been taken as an infant to Thripsey Shee; he had lived among the fairies-how many years? Eight, nine, ten? There was no way of knowing. Meanwhile, time in the outer world had advanced but a single year. For compelling reasons, the circumstances of Dhrun's childhood had been kept secret, despite speculation and wonder.

The two stood leaning on the parapets, watching for those they had come to meet. Aillas was moved to reminisce of earlier times. "I am never comfortable here; despair seems to hang in the air."

Dhrun looked up and down the terrace, which in the bright sunlight seemed inoffensive enough. "The place is old. It must be impregnated with misery, which weighs upon the soul."

"Do you feel it, then?"

"Not to any great extent," Dhrun admitted. "Perhaps I lack sensitivity."

Aillas, smiling, shook his head. "The

explanation is simple: you were never brought here as a slave. I have walked these very stones with a chain around my neck. I can feel the weight and hear the jangle; I could probably trace out where I placed my feet. I was in a state of utter despair."

Dhrun gave an uneasy laugh. "Now is now; then is then. You should feel exultation in that you have more than evened the score."

Aillas laughed again. "I do indeed! Exultation mixed with dread makes for an odd emotion!"

"Hmf," said Dhrun. "That is hard to



imagine."

Aillas turned to lean again on the parapet. "I often wonder about 'now' and 'then' and 'what is to be', and how one differs from the other. I have never heard a sensible explanation, and the thinking makes me more uneasy than ever."

Aillas pointed to a place down upon the plain. "See that little hillock yonder, with the scrub growing up the slopes? The Ska put me to digging in a tunnel, which was to extend out to that hillock. When the tunnel was finished, the tunnel gang would be killed, in order to secure the secret. One night we dug up to the surface and escaped, and so I am alive today."

"And the tunnel: was it ever finished?"

"I would expect so. I have never thought to look."

Dhrun pointed across the Plain of Shadows. "Riders are coming: a troop of knights, to judge by the glint of metal."

"They are not punctual," said Aillas.  
"Such indications are meaningful."

The column approached with stately deliberation, and finally revealed itself to be a troop of two dozen horsemen. In the van, on a high-stepping white horse, rode a herald, clad in half-armour. His horse was caparisoned in cloths of rose-

pink and gray; the herald carried high a gonfalon showing three white unicorns on a green field: the royal arms of Dahaut. Three more heralds followed close, holding aloft other standards. Behind, at a dignified distance, rode three knights abreast. They wore light armour and flowing cloaks of rich colors: one black, one dark green, one pale blue. The three were followed by sixteen men at-arms, each holding high a lance from which fluttered a green pennon.

"They make a brave show, despite their journey," observed Dhrun.

"So they have planned," said Aillas.

"Again, such indications are significant."

"Of what?"

"Ah! Such meanings are always more clear in retrospect! As for now, they are late, but they have troubled to make a fine arrival. These are mixed signs, which someone more subtle than I must interpret."

"Are the knights known to you?"

"Red and gray are the colors of Duke Claractus. I know him by reputation. The company would be riding from Castle Cirroc, which is the seat of Sir Wittes. He is evidently the second knight. As for

the third-" Aillas looked along the terrace and called to his herald Duirdry, standing a few yards distant. "Who rides in the company?"

"The first standard is that of King Audry: the company comes on royal business. Next, I note the standards of Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila. The other two are Sir Wittes of Harne and Castle Cirroc, and Sir Agwyd of Gyl. All are notables of long lineage and good connection."

"Go out upon the plain," said Aillas. "Meet these folk with courtesy and inquire their business. If the response comes in respectful language, I will

receive them at once in the hail. If they are brusque or minatory, bid them wait, and bring me their message."

Duirdry departed the parapets. A few moments later he emerged from the sally port with two men-at-arms for escort. The three rode black horses furnished with simple black harness. Duirdry displayed Aillas' royal standard: five white dolphins on a dark blue field. The men-at-arms carried banners quartered in the arms of Troicinet, Dascinet, North and South Ulfiand. They rode a hundred yards out upon the plain, then drew up their horses and waited in the bright sunlight, with the dun scarp and fortress looming behind them.

The Daut column halted at a distance of fifty yards. After a pause of a minute while both parties sat immobile, the Daut herald rode forward on his white horse. He reined to a halt five yards in front of Duirdry.

Watching from the parapets, Aillas and Dhrun saw the Daut herald speak the message dictated by Duke Claractus. Duirdry listened, made a terse response, turned about and rode back into the fortress. Presently he reappeared on the terrace and made his report.

“Duke Claractus extends his greetings. He speaks with the voice of King Audry, to this effect: 'In view of the amicable

relations holding between the Kingdoms of Troicinet and of Dahaut, King Audry desires that King Aillas terminate his encroachment upon the lands of Dahaut with all possible expedition and withdraw to the recognized borders of Ulfland. By so doing, King Aillas will eliminate what is now a source of grave concern for King Audry and will reassure him as to the continuation of the harmony now existent between the realms.' Duke Claractus, speaking for himself, desires that you now open the gates to his company that they may occupy the fortress, as is their duty and their right."

"Return," said Aillas. "Inform Duke



Claractus that he may enter the fortress, with an escort of two persons only, and that I will grant him an audience. Then bring him to the low hail."

Again Duidry departed. Aillas and Dhrun descended to the low hail: a dim chamber of no great size cut into the stone of the cliff. A small embrasure overlooked the plain; a doorway gave on a balcony fifty feet above the mustering yard at the back of the sally port.

Upon instructions from Aillas, Dhrun stationed himself in an anteroom at the front of the hall; here he awaited the Daut deputation.

Duke Claractus arrived without delay, along with Sir Wittes and Sir Agwyd. Claractus marched heavily into the chamber, and halted: a man tall and massive, black-haired, with a short black beard and stern black eyes in a harsh heavy face. Claractus wore a steel war-cap and a cloak of green velvet over a shirt of mail, with a sword swinging from his belt. Sir Wittes and Sir Agwyd were accoutered in similar style.

Dhrun spoke: "Your Grace, I am Dhrun, prince of the realm. Your audience with King Aillas will be informal and therefore is not a suitable occasion for the display of weapons. You may doff

your helmets and place your swords on the table, in accordance with the usual precepts of chivalry."

Duke Claractus gave his head a curt shake. "We are not here seeking an audience with King Aillas; that would be appropriate only in his own realms. He now visits a duchy within the Kingdom of Dahaut, such duchy being govemed by myself. I am paramount here, and the protocol is different. I deem this occasion to be a field parley. Our attire is appropriate in every respect. Lead us to the king."

Dhrun politely shook his head. "In that case I will deliver the message of King

Aillas and you may return to your company without further ado. Listen closely, for these are the words you must convey to King Audry. "King Aillas points out that the Ska occupied Poëlitetz over a period of ten years. The Ska also controlled the lands along the top of the Long Dann. During this time they encountered neither protest nor forceful counteraction from King Audry or yourself or from any other Daut agency. By the tenets of the common law dealing with cases of uncontested settlement, the Ska by their acts and in default of Daut counteracts gained ownership in full fee and title to Poëlitetz, and the lands along the top of the Long Dann."

“In due course the Ulfish army, commanded by King Aillas, defeated the Ska, drove them away, and took their property by force of arms. This property thereby became joined to the Kingdom of North Ulfiand, with full right and legality. These facts and the precedents of history and common practice are incontestable.”

Claractus stared long and hard at Dhrun. "You crow loudly for such a young cockerel."

"Your Grace, I merely repeat the words taught me by King Aillas, and I hope that I have not offended you. There is still another point to be considered."

"And what is that?"

"The Long Dann is clearly the natural boundary between Dahaut and North Ulfiand. The defensive strength of Poëlitetz means nothing to Dahaut; however, it is invaluable to the Kingdoms of North and South Ulfiand, in the case of attack from the east."

Claractus gave a hoarse laugh. "And if the attacking armies were Daut, what then? We would bitterly regret failing to claim our territory, as we do now."

"Your claim is denied," said Dhrun modestly. "I might add that our concern is not for the Daut armies, valorous

though they may be, but for the forces of King Casmir of Lyonesse, who hardly troubles to conceal his ambitions."

"If Casmir dares to venture a single step into Dahaut, he will suffer a terrible woe!" declared Claractus. "We will chase him the length of Old Street, and bring him to bay at Cape Farewell, where we will cut him and his surviving soldiers into small bits."

"Those are brave words!" said Dhrun. "I will repeat them to my father, for his reassurance. Our message to King Audry is this: Poëlitetz and the Long Dann are now part of North Ulfiand. He need fear no aggression from the west, and

therefore may apply his full energies against the Celt bandits who have caused him so much travail in Wysrod."

"Bah," muttered Claractus, unable for the moment to make any remark more cogent.

Dhrun bowed. "You have heard the words of King Aillas. There is no more to be said and you have my permission to go."

Duke Claractus glared a single moment, then swung on his heel, gestured to his companions and with no further words left the chamber.



From the embrasure Aillas and Dhrun watched the column receding across the Plain of Shadows. "Audry is somewhat languid and even a bit airy," said Aillas. "He may well decide that in this case his honour is not truly compromised. So I hope, since we need no more enemies. Nor, for that matter, does King Audry."

### III

During the Danaan incursions, Avallon had been a fortified market town hard by the estuary of the Camber, notable only for the many turrets rearing high above the town walls. The Danaan power ran its course; the tall hazel-eyed warriors

who fought naked save for bronze helmets disappeared into the fog of history. The walls of Avallon decayed; the mouldering turrets protected only bats and owls, but Avallon remained the 'City of Tall Towers'.

Before the Time of Troubles, Olam III made Avallon his capital and by dint of vast expenditure made Falu Ffail the most magnificent palace of the Elder Isles. His successors were not to be outmatched in this regard, and each vied with his predecessors in the richness and splendor of his contribution to the fabric of the palace.

When Audry II came to the throne, he

applied himself to the perfection of the palace gardens. He ordained six fountains of nineteen jets, each surrounded by a circular promenade with cushioned benches; he lined the central pleasance with marble nymphs and fauns to the number of thirty; at the terminus was an arcaded cupola where musicians played sweetly from dawn till dark, and sometimes later by moonlight. A garden of white roses flanked a similar expanse of red roses; lemon trees, clipped to the shape of spheres, bordered the square lawns where King Audry was wont to stroll with his favorites.

Falu Ffail was notable not only for its

gardens but also for the pomp and extravagance of its many pageants. Masques, fetes, spectacles, frivolities: they followed close one after another, each more lavish in its delights than the last. Gallant courtiers and beautiful ladies thronged the halls and galleries, clad in garments of marvellous style and complexity; each appraising the others with care, wondering as to the effect of his or her image, so carefully contrived.

All the aspects of life were dramatized and exaggerated; every instant was heavy as honey with significance. Nowhere was conduct more graceful nor manners more exquisite than at Falu Ffail. The air rustled with murmured

conversations; each lady as she passed trailed a waft of scent: jasmine or floris of orange-clove, or sandalwood, or essence of rose. In dim salons lovers kept rendezvous: sometimes secret, sometimes illicit; very little, however, escaped notice, and every Incident: amusing, grotesque, pathetic or all three-provided the grist of gossip.

At Falu Ffail intrigue was the stuff of both life and death. Under the glitter and glisten ran dark currents, of passion and heartbreak, envy and hate. There were duels by daybreak and murders by starlight, mysteries and disappearances, and royal banishments when indiscretions became intolerable.

Audry's rule was generally benevolent, if only because all his juridical decisions were carefully prepared for him by his chan cellor Sir Namias. Nonetheless, sitting on the throne Evandig in his scarlet robes and wearing his golden crown, Audry seemed the very definition of benign majesty. His personal attributes enhanced the kingly semblance. He was tall and imposing in stature, if somewhat heavy of hip and soft in the belly. Glossy black ringlets hung beside his pale cheeks; a fine black mustache graced his ripe upper lip. Under expressive black eyebrows his brown eyes were large and moist, if set perhaps too closely beside his long

disdainful nose.

Queen Dafnyd, Audry's spouse, originally a princess of Wales and two years older than Audry, had borne him three sons and three daughters; now she no longer commanded Audry's ardors. Dafnyd cared not a whit and took no interest in Audry's little affairs; her own inclinations were adequately soothed by a trio of stalwart footmen. King Audry disapproved of the arrangement, and frowned haughtily upon the footmen when he passed them in the gallery.

During fine weather, Audry often took a leisurely breakfast in a private part of the garden, at the center of a large square

of lawn. The breakfasts were informal, and Audry was usually attended only by a few cronies. Toward the end of such an occasion, Audry's seneschal, Sir Tramador, approached to announce the arrival of Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila, who desired an audience at King Audry's earliest convenience.

Audry listened with a grimace of annoyance; such tidings were seldom the source of good cheer and, worse, often required that Audry spend hours in tedious consultation.

Sir Tramador waited, smiling the most gentle of smiles to see King Audry



wrestling with the need to exert himself. Audry at last groaned in irritation and jerked his heavy white fingers. "Bring Claractus here; I will see him at this moment, and be rid of the matter."

Sir Tramador turned away, mildly surprised to find King Audry so brisk. Five minutes later he ushered Duke Claractus across the lawn. From the evidence of dusty skin and soiled clothing, Claractus had only just alighted from his horse.

Claractus bowed before King Audry. "Sire, my excuses! I have ignored punctilio in order that I might report to you as soon as possible. Last night I

slept at Verwi Underdyke; by dint of early rising and hard riding I am here now."

"I commend your zeal," said Audry. "If I were served everywhere as well I would never cease to rejoice! Your news, then, would seem to be of moment."

"That, Sire, is for you to judge. Shall I speak?"

Audry pointed to a chair. "Seat yourself, Claractus! You are acquainted, or so I presume, with Sir Huynemer, Sir Archem and Sir Rudo."

Claractus, glancing toward the three, gave a curt nod. "I took note of them on my last visit; they were enjoying a charade and all three were dressed as harlequins, or clowns, or something of the sort."

"I fail to recall the occasion," said Sir Huynemer stiffly.

"No matter," said Audry. "Speak your news, which I hope will elevate my spirits."

Claractus gave a harsh chuckle. "Were this the case, Sire, I would have ridden all night. My news is not gratifying. I conferred, as instructed, with King

Aillas, at the fortress Poëlitetz. I expressed your views in exact words. He gave his response with courtesy, but yielded no substance. He will not vacate Poelitetz nor the lands at the top of the Long Dann. He states that he conquered these places from the Ska, who had taken them by force of arms from the Daut realm and into their ownership. The Ska, he points out, had maintained this ownership in the absence of challenge from your royal armies. Thus, so he asserts, title to fortress and lands have devolved upon the Kingdom of North Ulfiand."

Audry uttered a sibilant ejaculation. "Sarsicante! Does he hold my favor in

such small regard, to flout me thus? He would seem to scoff both at my dignity and at the might of Daut arms!"

"Not so, Sire! I would be remiss if I gave that impression. His tone was polite and respectful. He made it clear that he guards Ulfiand not against Dahaut but rather against the possibility of King Casmir's aggressive intent, which, so he states, is general knowledge."

"Bah!" snapped Audry. "That is most farfetched! How could Casmir arrive on the Plain of Shadows without first defeating the entire armed strength of Dahaut?"

"King Aillas feels that the contingency, while remote, is real. In any event, he relies most strongly upon his first argument, to wit: that the lands are his by right of conquest."

Sir Rudo cried out in scorn: "An argument specious and incorrect! Does he take us for lumpkins? The boundaries of Dahaut are grounded in tradition; they have been immutable for centuries!"

"Precisely true!" declared Sir Archem. "The Ska must be regarded as transient interlopers, no more!"

King Audry made an impatient gesture. "Obviously it is not so easy! I must give

the matter thought. Meanwhile, Claractus, will you not join us at our breakfast? Your dress is somewhat at discord, but surely no one with a conscience will cry you shame."

"Thank you, Sire. I will gladly eat, for I am famished."

The conversation shifted to topics more agreeable, but the mood of the breakfast had been roiled and presently Sir Huynemer again condemned the provocative conduct of King Aillas. Sir Rudo and Sir Archem endorsed his views, each advising a stern rebuff to put the 'young Troice upstart' in his place.

Audry leaned heavily back in his chair. "All very well! But I wonder how this chastening of Aillas is to be accomplished."

"Aha! If several strong companies were dispatched into the March, with clear indications that we intended to take back our lands by force, Aillas might well chirp from a different branch!"

King Audry rubbed his chin. "You feel that he would yield to a show of resolution."

"Would he dare challenge the might of Dahaut?"



"Suppose that, through folly or recklessness, he refused to yield?"

"Then Duke Claractus would strike with his full might, to send young Aillas and his Ulf bantlings bounding and leaping across the moors like so many hares."

Claractus held up his hand. "I am chary of so much glory. You have envisioned the campaign; you shall be in command and lead the charge."

Sir Huynemer, with raised eyebrows and a cold glance for Claractus, qualified his concepts. "Sire, I put this scheme forward as an option to be studied, no more."

Audry turned to Claractus. "Is not Poëlitetz considered impregnable to assault?"

"This is the general belief."

Sir Rudo gave a skeptical grunt. "This belief has never been tested, though it has cowed folk for generations."

Claractus smiled grimly. "How does one attack a cliff?"

"The sally port might be rammed and sundered,"

"Why trouble? The defenders at your request will be pleased to leave the

portcullis ajar. When a goodly number of noble knights-say, a hundred or more-has swarmed into the yard, the portcullis is dropped and the captives are destroyed at leisure."

"Then the Long Dann itself must be scaled!"

"It is not easy to climb a cliff while enemies are dropping rocks from above."

Sir Rudo gave Claractus a haughty inspection. "Sir, can you offer us nothing but gloom and dismal defeat? The king has stated his requirements; still you decry every proposal intended to

achieve the goal!"

"Your ideas are impractical," said Claractus. "I cannot take them seriously."

Sir Archem struck the table with his fist. "Nevertheless, chivalry demands that we respond to this insulting encroachment!"

Claractus turned to King Audry. "You are fortunate, Sire, in the fiery zeal of your paladins! They are paragons of ferocity! You should loose them against the Celts in Wysrod, who have been so noxious a nuisance!"

Sir Huynemer made a growling sound

under his breath. "All this is beside the point."

Audry heaved a sigh, blowing out his black mustaches. "For a fact, our Wysrod campaigns have brought us little glory and less satisfaction."

Sir Huynemer spoke earnestly: "Sire, the difficulties in Wysrod are many! The gossoons are like specters; we chase them over tussock and bog; we bring them to bay; they melt into the Wysrod mists, and presently attack our backs, with yells and screams and insane Celtic curses, so that our soldiers become confused."

Duke Claractus laughed aloud. "You should train your soldiers not for parades but for fighting; then they might not fear mists and curses."

Sir Huynemer uttered a curse of his own: "Devilspit and dog-balls! I resent these words! My service to the king has never been challenged!"

"Nor mine!" declared Sir Rudo. "The Celts are a minor vexation which we will soon abate!"

King Audry pettishly clapped his hands. "Peace, all of you! I wish no further wrangling in my presence!"

Duke Claractus rose to his feet. "Sire, I have spoken hard truths which otherwise you might not hear. Now, by your leave, I will retire and refresh myself."

"Do so, good Claractus! I trust that you will join us as we dine."

"With pleasure, Sire."

Claractus departed. Sir Archem watched him stride across the lawn, then turned back with a snort of disapproval. "There goes a most prickly fellow!"

"No doubt loyal, and as brave as a boar in rut-of this I am sure," declared Sir Rudo. "But, like most provincials, he is

purblind to wide perspectives."

"Bah!" said Sir Huynemer in disgust. "Provincial only? I find him uncouth, with his horse-blanket cloak and blurting style of speech."

Sir Rudo spoke thoughtfully: "It would seem part and parcel of the same attribute, as if one fault generated the other." He put a cautious question to the king: "What are Your Majesty's views?"

Audry made no direct response. "I will reflect on the matter. Such decisions cannot be formed on the instant."

Sir Tramador approached King Audry.



He bent and muttered into the royal ear:  
"Sire, it is time that you were changing  
into formal robes."

"Whatever for?" cried Audry.

"Today, Sire, if you recall, you sit at the  
assizes."

Audry turned an aggrieved glance on Sir  
Tramador. "Are you certain of this?"

"Indeed, Sire! The litigants are already  
gathering in the Outer Chamber."

Audry scowled and sighed. "So now I  
must finick with folly and greed and all  
what interests me least! It is tedium

piled on obfuscation! Tramador, have you no mercy? Always you trouble me during my trifling little periods of rest!"

"I regret the need to do so, Your Highness."

"Ha! I suppose that if I must, I must; there is no escaping it."

"Unfortunately not, Your Majesty. Will you use the Grand Saloon<sup>4</sup> or the Old Hall?"

Audry considered. "What cases await judgment?"

Sir Tramador tendered a sheet of

parchment. "This is the list, with the clerk's analysis and comments. You will note a single robber to be hanged and an innkeeper who watered his wine, for a flogging. Otherwise there seems nothing of large import."

"Just so. The Old Hall it shall be. I am never easy on Evandig; it seems to shudder and squirm beneath me, an anomalous sensation to say the least."

"So I would think, Your Majesty!"

The assizes ran their course. King Audry returned to his private quarters, where his valets dressed him for the afternoon. However, Audry did not immediately

leave the chamber. He dismissed his valets and, dropping into a chair, sat brooding upon the issues raised by Duke Claractus.

The prospect of retaking Poëlitetz by force was, of course, absurd. Hostilities with King Aillas could benefit only Casmir of Lyonesse.

Audry rose to his feet, to pace back and forth, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. When all was taken with all, so he reflected, Aillas had spoken only stark and unvarnished truth. Danger to Dahaut came not from the Ulflands, nor from Troicinet, but from Lyonesse.

Claractus not only had brought no cheer, but also had hinted at some unpleasant realities which Audry preferred to ignore. The Daut troops in their fine uniforms made a brave show at parades, but even Audry conceded that their conduct on the battlefield might be held suspect.

Audry sighed. To remedy the situation called for measures so drastic that his mind jerked quickly back, like the fronds of a sensitive plant.

Audry threw his hands high into the air. All would be well; unthinkable otherwise! Problems ignored were problems defeated! Here was the

sensible philosophy; a man would go mad trying to repair each deficiency of the universe!

Thus fortified, Audry called in his valets. They settled a smart hat with a cocked crown and a scarlet plume upon his head; Audry blew out his moustaches and departed the chamber.

## IV

The Kingdom of Lyonesse extended across South Hybras, from the Cantabrian Gulf to Cape Farewell on the Atlantic Ocean. From Castle Haidion at the back of Lyonesse Town King Casmir ruled with a justice more vigorous than

that of King Audry. Casmir's court was characterized by exact protocol and decorum; pomp, rather than ostentation or festivity, dictated the nature of events at Haidion.

King Casmir's spouse was Queen Sollace, a large languid woman almost as tall as Casmir. She wore her fine yellow hair in bundles on top of her head, and bathed in milk, the better to nourish her soft white skin. Casmir's son and heir-apparent was the dashing Prince Cassander; also included in the royal family was Princess Madouc, purportedly the daughter of the tragic Princess Suidrun, now nine years dead.

Castle Haidion overlooked Lyonesse Town from the shoulder of a low rise, showing from below as an interlocked set of ponderous stone blocks, surmounted by seven towers of differing styles and shape: the Tower of Lapadius<sup>5</sup>, the Tall Tower<sup>6</sup> the King's Tower, the West Tower, the Tower of Owls, Palaemon's Tower, and the East Tower. The ponderous structure and the towers provided Haidion a silhouette which, if graceless, archaic and eccentric, was in total contrast to the fine façade of Falu Ffail at Avallon.

In much the same manner, the person of King Casmir contrasted with that of King Audry. Casmir was florid and seemed to



throb with strong and ruddy blood. Casmir's hair and beard were mats of crisp blond ringlets. Audry's complexion was as sallow as ivory, and his hair was richly black. Casmir was burly, thick of torso and neck, with round china-blue eyes staring from a slab-sided face. Audry, while tall and ample of girth, was measured of posture and carefully graceful.

The court of neither king lacked for regal comfort; both enjoyed their perquisites, but while Audry cultivated the company of his favorites, of both sexes, Casmir knew no intimates and kept no mistresses. Once each week he paid a stately visit to the bedchamber of Queen

Sollace, and there addressed himself to her massive and lethargic white body. On other less formal occasions, he made shift to ease himself upon the quivering body of one of his pretty pages.

The company Casmir liked best was that of his spies and informers. From such sources he learned of Aillas' intransigence at Poëlitetz almost as soon as had King Audry himself. The news, though it came as no surprise, aroused Casmir's vigorous displeasure. Sooner or later he intended to invade Dahaut, destroy the Daut armies and consolidate a quick victory before Aillas could effectively bring to bear his own power. With Aillas ensconced at Poëlitetz, the

situation became more difficult, since Alias could instantly counterattack with Ulfish troops across the March and there would be no swift decision to the war. Definitely, the danger posed by the fortress Poëlitetz must be eliminated.

This was no sudden new concept. Casmir had long worked to foment dissension among the Ulfish barons, that they might enter upon a full-scale rebellion against the rule of their foreign king. To this end he had recruited Torqual, a renegade Ska turned outlaw.

The enterprise had yielded no truly gratifying results. For all Torqual's ruthlessness and cunning, he lacked

tractability, which limited his usefulness. As the months passed, Casmir became impatient and dissatisfied; where were Torqual's achievements? In response to Casmir's orders, transmitted by courier, Torqual only demanded more gold and silver. Casmir had already disbursed large sums; further, he suspected that Torqual could easily meet his needs by means of plunder and depredation, thus saving Casmir unnecessary expense.

For conferences with his private agents, Casmir favored the Room of Sighs, a chamber above the armoury. In olden times, before construction of the Peinhador, the armoury had served as

the castle's torture chamber; prisoners awaiting attention sat above in the Room of Sighs, where the sensitive ear-so it was said-might still detect plaintive sounds.

The Room of Sighs was bleak and stark, furnished with a pair of wooden benches, a table of oak planks, two chairs, a tray with an old beechwood flask and four beechwood mugs, to which Casmir had taken a fancy.

A week after receiving news of the impasse at Poëlitetz, Casmir was notified by his underchamberlain, Eschar, that the courier Robalf awaited his convenience in the Room of Sighs.

Casmir at once took himself to the cheerless chamber over the armoury. On one of the benches sat Robalf-a person gaunt and thin-faced with darting brown eyes, sparse brown hair and a long crooked nose. He wore travel-stained garments of brown fust and a high-peaked black felt cap; upon the entrance of Casmir he jumped to his feet, doffed the cap and bowed. "Sire, I am at your service!"

Casmir looked him up and down, gave a curt nod and went to sit behind the table. "Well then, what is your news?"

Robaif responded in a reedy voice: "Sire, I have done your bidding, tarrying

not a step along the way, pausing not even to empty my bladder!"

Casmir pulled at his chin. "Surely you did not perform this function on the run?"

"Sire, haste and duty make heroes of us all!"

"Interesting." Casmir poured wine from the beechwood flask into one of the mugs. He gestured toward the second chair. "Be seated, good Robaif, and divulge your tidings in comfort."

Robalf gingerly perched his thin haunches upon the edge of the chair. "Sire, I met with Torqual at the

appointed place. I delivered your summons, that he must come to Lyonesse Town, using your words and speaking with your kingly authority. I bade him make ready at once, that we might ride the Trompada south together."

"And his response?"

"It was enigmatic. At first he spoke not at all, and I wondered if he had ever heard my voice. Then he uttered these words: 'I will not go to Lyonesse Town.'"

"I remonstrated with all urgency, citing again Your Majesty's command. Torqual at last spoke a message for your ears."



"Ho ha!" muttered Casmir. "Did he now? What was the message?"

"I must warn, Sire, that he used little tact and scamped the appropriate honourifics."

"Never mind. Speak the message."  
Casmir drank from his beechwood mug.

"First of all, he sent his best and most fervent regards, and his hopes for Your Majesty's continued good health: that is to say, he addressed certain odd sounds to the wind and this is how I interpreted their sense. He then stated that only fear for his life precluded full and instant obedience to Your Majesty's

instructions. He then made a request for funds either of silver or of gold, in quantity adequate to his needs, which he described as large."

Casmir compressed his lips. "Is that the whole of his message?"

"No, Sire. He stated that he would be overjoyed for the privilege of meeting with Your Majesty, should you deign to visit a place called Mook's Tor. He supplied directions for arriving at this place, which I will communicate as Your Majesty requires."

"Not at the moment." Casmir leaned back in the chair. "To my ears, this

message carries a flavor of casual insolence. What is your opinion?"

Robalf frowned and licked his lips.

"Your Majesty, I shall render my frank assessment, if that is what you wish."

"Speak, Robaif! Above all, I value frankness."

"Very well, Your Majesty. I apprehend in Torqual's conduct not so much insolence as indifference mixed with a dark twist of humour. He would seem to live in a world where he is alone with Fate; where all other persons, your august self and I as well, are no more than colored shadows, to use a

flamboyant figure. In short, rather than indulging in purposeful insolence, Torqual cares nothing one way or another for your royal sensibilities. If you are to deal with him, it must be on this basis. Such, at least, is my belief." Robalf looked sidewise toward Casmir, whose face gave no clue as to his emotions.

Casmir spoke at last, in a voice reassuringly mild. "Does he intend to do my bidding or not? That is the most important matter of all."

"Torqual is unpredictable," said Robalf. "I suspect that you will find him no more malleable in the future than in the past."

Casmir gave a single curt nod. "Robalf, you have spoken to the point, and indeed have clarified the mysteries surrounding this perverse cutthroat, at least to some small extent."

"I am happy to be of service, Sire."

For a moment Casmir ruminated, then asked: "Did he render any account of his achievements?"

"So he did, but somewhat as afterthought. He told of taking Castle Glen Gath, killing Baron Nols and his six sons; he mentioned the burning of Maltaing Keep, seat of Baron Ban Oc, during which occasion all within were

consumed by the flames. Both of these lords were staunch in the service of King Aillas."

Casmir grunted. "Aillas has sent out four companies to hunt down Torqual. That is my latest information. I wonder how long Torqual will survive."

"Much depends upon Torqual," said Robalf. "He can hide among the crags or down in the fastnesses, and never be found. But if he comes out to make his forays, then someday his luck must turn bitter and he will be tracked to his lair and brought to bay."

"No doubt but what you are right," said

Casmir. He rapped on the table; Eschar entered the room. "Sire?"

"Pay over to Robalf a purse of ten silver forms, together with one heavy coin of gold. Then house him comfortably near at hand."

Robalf bowed. "Thank you, Sire." The two departed the Room of Sighs.

Casmir remained at the table thinking. Neither Torqual's conduct nor his exploits were gratifying. Casmir had instructed Torqual to incite the barons one against the other, using ambush, false clues, rumours and deceit. His acts of plunder, murder and rapine served

only to identify Torqual as a savage outlaw, against whom all hands must be turned in concert, despite old feuds and past suspicions. Torqual's conduct therefore worked to unite the barons, rather than to set them at odds!

Casmir gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. He drank from the beechwood mug and set it down on the table with a thud. His fortunes were not on the rise. Torqual, considered as an instrument of policy, had proved capricious and probably useless. He was more than likely a madman. At Poëlitetz, Aillas had entrenched himself, impeding Casmir's grand ambition. And yet another concern, even more poignant, gnawed at



Casmir's mind: the prediction uttered  
long years before by Persilian the Magic  
Mirror. The words had never stopped  
ringing in Casmir's mind:

*Suldrun 's son shall undertake*

*Before his life is gone*

*To sit his right and proper place*

*At Cairbra an Meadhan.*

*If so he sits and so he thrives*

*Then he shall make his own*

*The Table Round, to Casmir's woe,*

*And Evandig his Throne.*

The terms of the prophecy, from the first, had mystified Casmir. Suldrun had borne a single child: the Princess Madouc - or so it had seemed - and Persilian's rhyme would appear to be sheer nonsense. But Casmir knew that this was never the way of it, and in the end, the truth was made known and Casmir's pessimism was vindicated. Suidrun's child had indeed been a boy, whom the fairies of Thripsey Shee had taken, leaving behind an unwanted brat of their own. All unwittingly King Casmir and Queen Sollace had nurtured the changeling, presenting her to the world as 'Princess Madouc'.

Persilian's prophecy was now less of a paradox, and therefore all the more ominous. Casmir had sent his agents to search, but in vain: Suldrun's first-born was nowhere to be found.

Sitting in the Room of Sighs, clasping the beechwood mug in one heavy hand, Casmir belabored his brain with the same questions he had propounded a thousand times before: "Who is this thrice-cursed child? What is his name? Where does he bide, so demure and quiet from my knowledge? Ah, but I would make short work of it, if once I knew!"

As always, the questions brought no

answers, and his baffle ment remained. As for Madouc, she had long been accepted as the daughter of the Princess Suidrun, and could not now be disavowed. To legitimize her presence, a romantic tale had been concocted, of a noble knight, secret trysts in the old garden, marriage pledges exchanged in the moonlight, and at last the baby who had become the delightful little princess, darling of the court. The tale was as good as any, and for a fact corresponded closely with the truth-save, of course, for the identity of the baby. As to the identity of Suidrun's lover, no one knew or cared any longer, except King Casmir, who in his rage had dropped the unfortunate young man into an oubliette

without so much as learning his name.

For Casmir, Princess Madouc represented only an exasperation. According to accepted lore, fairy children, when nurtured upon human food and living in human surroundings, gradually lost their haifling cast and were assimilated into the realm of mortals. But sometimes other tales were heard, of changelings who never crossed over, and remained odd wild beings: fickle, sly and cantankerous. Casmir occasionally wondered which sort might be the Princess Madouc. Indeed she differed from other maidens of the court, and at times displayed traits which caused him perplexity and uneasiness.

At this time Madouc still knew nothing of her true parentage. She believed herself the daughter of Suldrun: so she had been assured; why should it be otherwise? Even so, there were discordant elements in the accounts presented by Queen Sollace and the ladies appointed to train her in court etiquette. These were Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone. Madouc disliked and distrusted both; each thought to change her in one way or an other, despite Madouc's resolve to remain as she was.

Madouc was now about nine years old, restless and active, long of leg, with a boy's thin body and a girl's clever pretty face. Sometimes she confined her mop of

copper-gold curls with a black ribbon; as often as she allowed it to tumble helter-skelter across her forehead and over her ears. Her eyes were a melting sky-blue, her mouth was wide, and jerked, twisted or drooped to the flux of her feelings. Madouc was considered unruly and willful; the words 'fantastical', 'perverse', 'incorrigible', were sometimes used to describe her temperament.

When Casmir first discovered the facts of Madouc's birth, his immediate reaction was shock, then incredulity, then fury so extreme that it might have gone badly for Madouc had her neck been within reach of Casmir's hands.

When he became calm, he saw that he had no choice but to put a good face on the situation; in not too many years Madouc no doubt could be married advantageously.

Casmir departed the Room of Sighs and returned toward his private chambers. The route led him across the back elevation of the King's Tower, where the corridor became a cloistered way overlooking the service yard from a height of twelve feet or so.

Arriving at the portal which gave on the cloisters, Casmir stopped short at the sight of Madouc. She stood in one of the arched openings, poised on tiptoe so that



she could peer over the balustrade down into the service yard.

Casmir paused to watch, frowning in that mixture of suspicion and displeasure which Madouc and her activities often aroused in him. He now took note that on the balustrade beside Madouc's elbow rested a bowl of rotten quinces, one of which she held delicately in her hand.

As Casmir watched she drew back her arm and threw the quince at a target in the yard below. She watched for an instant, then drew back, choking with laughter.

Casmir marched forward. He loomed

above her. "What mischief do you now contrive?"

Madouc jerked around in startlement, and stood wordlessly, head tilted back, mouth half open. Casmir peered down through the arch into the service yard. Below stood Lady Desdea, staring up in a fury, while she wiped fragments of quince from her neck and bodice, her stylish tricorne hat askew. At the sight of King Casmir looking down from above, her face sagged in astonishment. For a moment she stood frozen into immobility. Then, dropping a perfunctory curtsy, she settled her hat and hurried across the yard into the castle.

Casmir slowly drew back. He looked down at Madouc. "Why did you throw fruit at Lady Desdea?"

Madouc said artlessly: "It was because Lady Desdea came past first, before Lady Marmone."

"That is not relevant to the issue!" snapped King Casmir. "At this moment Lady Desdea believes that I pelted her with bad fruit."

Madouc nodded soberly. "It may be all for the best. She will take the reprimand more seriously than if it came mysteriously, as if from nowhere."

"Indeed? And what are her faults, that she deserves such a bitter reproach?"

Madouc looked up in wonder, her eyes wide and blue. "In the main, Sire, she is tiresome beyond endurance and drones on forever. At the same time, she is sharp as a fox, and sees around corners. Also, if you can believe it, she insists that I learn to sew a fine seam!"

"Bah!" muttered Casmir, already bored with the subject. "Your conduct is in clear need of correction. You must throw no more fruit!"

Madouc scowled and shrugged. "Fruit is nicer than other stuffs. I well believe that

Lady Desdea would prefer fruit."

"Throw no other stuffs either. A royal princess expresses displeasure more graciously."

Madouc considered a moment. "What if these stuffs should fall of their own weight?"

"You must allow no substances, either vile, or hurtful, or noxious, or of any sort whatever, to fall, or depart from your control, toward Lady Desdea. In short, desist from these activities!"

Madouc pursed her mouth in dissatisfaction; it seemed as if King

Casmir would yield neither to logic nor persuasion. Madouc wasted no more words. "Just so, Your Majesty."

King Casmir surveyed the service yard once again, then continued on his way. Madouc lingered a moment, then followed the king along the passage.

# CHAPTER TWO

## I

Madouc's assumptions were incorrect. The event in the service yard had strongly affected Lady Desdea, but not instantly was she prompted to alter her philosophical bent, nor, by extension, her methods for teaching Madouc. As Lady Desdea hurried along the dim corridors of Castle Haidion, she felt only a great bewilderment. She asked herself: "How have I erred? What was my fault, that I have so incited His Majesty? Above all, why should he signal his disfavor in such an

extraordinary manner? Is there some symbolism here which evades me? Surely he has recognized the diligent and selfless work I have done with the princess! It is truly most odd!"

Lady Desdea came into the Great Hall, and a new suspicion entered her mind. She stopped short. "Does the matter conceivably go deeper? Am I perhaps the victim of intrigue? What other explanation is possible. Or-to think the unthinkable-does His Majesty find me personally repugnant? True enough, my semblance is one of stateliness and refinement, rather than a simpering teasing coquetry, as might be practiced by some paltry little frippet, all paste



and perfume and amorous contortion. But surely any gentleman of discernment must notice my inner beauty, which derives from maturity and nobility of spirit!"

For a fact, Lady Desdea's semblance, as she herself suspected, was not instantly compelling. She was large of bone, long of shank, flat of chest and elsewhere somewhat gaunt, with a long equine face and pad of straw-colored ringlets hanging down the sides of her face. Despite all else, Lady Desdea was expert in every phase of propriety, and understood the most delicate nuances of court etiquette. ("When a lady receives the duty of a gentleman, she neither

stands staring like a heron which has just swallowed a fish, nor yet will she wreath her face in a fatuous simper. Rather, she murmurs a pleasantry and shows a smile of perceptible but not immoderate warmth. Her posture is erect; she neither sidles nor hops; she wriggles neither shoulders nor hips. Her elbows remain in contact with her body. As she inclines her head, her hands may go behind her back, should she deem the gesture graceful. At no time should she look vacantly elsewhere, call or signal to friends, spit upon the floor, nor embarrass the gentleman with impertinent comments.")

In all Lady Desdea's experience, nothing

had occurred to parallel the event in the service yard. As she marched along the corridor her perplexity remained as carking as ever. She arrived at the private chambers of Queen Sollace, and was admitted into the queen's parlour, to find Sollace reclining among green velvet cushions on a large sofa. Behind stood her maid Ermelgart, grooming Sollace's great masses of fine pale hair. Ermelgart had already combed out the heavy strands, using a nutritive dust of ground almonds, calomel and powdered calcine of peacock bone. She brushed the hair until it shone like pale yellow silk; then rolled it into a pair of bundles, which would at last be secured under nets studded with sapphire cabochons.

To the annoyance of Lady Desdea, there were three other persons in the chamber. At the window the Ladies Bortrude and Parthenope worked at embroidery; at Sollace's elbow, perched modestly on a stool, sat Father Umphred, his buttocks overflowing the seat. Today he wore a cassock of brown fustian, the hood thrown back. His tonsure revealed a pale flat scalp fringed with mouse-brown hair; below were soft white cheeks, a snub nose, protuberant dark eyes, a small pink mouth. Father Umphred's post was spiritual adviser to the queen; today in one plump hand he held a sheaf of drawings depicting aspects of the new basilica, now in

construction near the north end of the harbour.

Lady Desdea came forward and started to speak, only to be cut short by a flutter of Queen Sollace's fingers. "One moment, Ottilie! As you see, I am occupied with important matters."

Lady Desdea stood back, chewing her lip, while Father Umphred displayed the drawings, one after the other, eliciting small cries of enthusiasm from Sollace. She voiced only a single reproach: "If only we could build an edifice of truly magnificent proportions, to put all others, the world over, to shame!"

Father Umphred smilingly shook his head. "My dear queen, be reassured! The Basilica of Sanctissima Sollace, Beloved of the Angels, will lack for naught in the holy afflatus which it wafts on high!"

"Oh truly, will it be so?"

"Beyond all doubt! Devotion is never measured in terms of gross magnitude! Were it so, a brute beast of the wild would exert more notice in the halls of Heaven than some tiny babe being blessed with the sacrament of baptism!"

"As always, you place all our little problems in proper perspective!"

Lady Desdea could no longer contain herself. She crossed the chamber and bent to murmur into Queen Sollace's ear: "I must have private words with Your Majesty, at once."

Sollace, absorbed in the drawings, made an absentminded gesture. "Patience, if you please! These are discussions of serious moment!" She touched her finger to a place on the drawing. "Despite all, if we could add an atrium here, with the toil rooms to either side, rather than across the transept, then the space would serve for a pair of lesser apses, each with its shrine."

"My dear queen, we could follow this

plan were we to shorten the nave by the requisite amount."

Queen Sollace made a petulant sound. "But I do not care to do this! In fact, I would wish to add another five yards to its length, and also augment the curve here, at the back of the apse! We would gain scope for a truly splendid reredos!"

"The concept is undeniably excellent," declared Father Umphred. "Still, it must be remembered that the foundations are already laid and in place. They control the present dimensions."

"Cannot they be extended by just a bit?"



Father Umphred gave his head a sad shake. "We are limited, sadly enough, by a paucity of funds! Were there an unstinting amplitude, anything might be possible."

"Always, always the same dreary tale!" gloomed Queen Sollace. "Are these masons and laborers and stonecutters so greedy for gold that they will not work for the glory of the church?"

"It has always been thus, dear lady! Nevertheless I pray each day that His Majesty, in the fullness of his generosity, will grant us our sufficiency."

Queen Sollace made a glum sound. "The

splendour of the basilica is not His Majesty's highest priority."

Father Umphred spoke in thoughtful tones. "The king should remember an important fact. Once the basilica is whole, the financial tide reverses. Folk will come from near and far to worship and sing songs of praise and bestow gifts, of gold and silver! By this means they hope to gain the gratitude of a joyful Heaven."

"Such gifts will bring joy to me as well, if we may thereby adorn our church with proper richness."

"To this end we must provide goodly

relics," said Father Umphred wisely. "Nothing loosens the purse strings like a fine relic! The king should know this! Pilgrims will enhance the general prosperity, and, by inevitable flux, the royal exchequer as well! All considered, relics are very good things."

"Oh yes, we must have relics!" cried Queen Sollace. "Where will they be obtained?"

Father Umphred shrugged. "It is not so easy, since many of the best have been preempted. However, if one is assiduous, relics may still be had: by gift, by purchase, by capture from the infidels or sometimes by discovery in

unexpected places. Certainly it is not too early to start our search."

"We must discuss this matter in full detail," said Queen Sollace, and then, somewhat sharply: "Ottile, you are in a state of obvious discomfiture! What is the matter?"

"I am confused and baffled," said Lady Desdea. "That is quite true."

"Tell us, then, what has occurred, and we will puzzle it out together."

"I can only impart this matter to you in private."

Queen Sollace made a pettish face. "Just so, if you truly feel that such precautions are necessary." She turned to the Ladies Bortude and Parthenope. "It seems that for once we must indulge Lady Desdea in her whim. You may attend me later. Ermelgart, I will ring the bell when I am ready for you."

Lady Bortrude and Lady Parthenope, each with nose haughtily high, departed the parlour, along with the maid Ermelgart. Father Umphred paused, but was not urged to remain and so also departed.

Without further delay Lady Desdea told of the events which had caused her so

much distress. "It was time for the Princess Madouc's diction exercises, which are most necessary; she slurs and lilts like a hoyden of the docks. As I walked across the service yard on my way to the lesson, I was struck on the neck by a piece of rotten fruit, hurled from above with both accuracy and force. I am sorry to say that I instantly suspected the princess, who is sometimes prone to mischief. However, when I looked up, I found His Majesty watching me with a most curious expression. If I were an imaginative woman and the person were other than His Majesty, who of course has the best of reasons for all his deeds, I would describe the expression as a leer of

triumph, or, perhaps more accurately, vindictive glee!"

"Amazing!" said Queen Sollace. "How can it be? I am as astonished as you; His Majesty is not one to perform silly pranks."

"Naturally not! Still-" Lady Desdea looked over her shoulder in annoyance, as into the parlour came Lady Marmone, her face suffused with anger.

Lady Desdea spoke crisply: "Narcissa, if you please, I am consulting with Her Majesty upon a most serious affair. If you will be kind enough to-"

Lady Marmone, as stern and doughty as Lady Desdea herself, made a furious gesture. "Your business can wait! What I have to say must be said at this very instant! Not five minutes ago, as I crossed the kitchen yard, I was hit on the forehead by an overripe quince, thrown down from the arcade above."

Queen Sollace gave a throaty cry. "Yet again?"

" 'Yet' or 'again', whatever you like! It happened as I have described it! Outrage gave me vigor; I ran at speed up the stairs hoping to waylay the perpetrator, and who should come trotting from the corridor, smiling and gay, but the



Princess Madouc!"

"Madouc?" "Madouc?" cried out Queen Sollace and Lady Desdea together, as if in one voice.

"Who else? She confronted me without a qualm and even asked me to move aside so that she might continue on her way.

Nevertheless, I detained her and asked: 'Why did you hurl a quince at me?' She said, quite soberly: 'With nothing more suitable at hand, I used quince; this was on the strong advice of His Majesty the King.' I cried out: 'Am I to understand that His Majesty advised you to such a deed? Why should he do so?' And she

responded: 'Perhaps he feels that you and Lady Desdea are inexcusably tiresome and tedious in your instruction.'

"Astonishing!" said Lady Desdea. "I am dumbfounded!"

Lady Marmone went on: "I told her: 'Out of respect for your rank, I may not properly chastise you as you deserve, but I will immediately report this outrage to Her Majesty the Queen!' The princess responded with an airy shrug and continued on her way. Is it not remarkable?"

"Remarkable but not unique!" said Lady

Desdea. "I suffered in the same degree, but it was King Casmir himself who hurled the fruit."

Lady Marmone stood silent for a moment, then said: "In that case, I am confused indeed!"

Queen Sollace heaved herself erect. "I must get to the bottom of this! Come! Before the hour is out we shall know what is what and which is which."

The queen and her two ladies, with Father Umphred coming unobtrusively behind, found King Casmir in conference with the High Seneschal Sir Mungo and the royal secretary Pacuin.

Casmir looked around with a frown, then rose heavily to his feet. "My dear Sollace, what is so urgent as to bring you here during my consultations?"

"I must have a word with you in private," said Sollace. "Be good enough to dismiss your counsellors, if only for a few moments."

Casmir, noting Lady Desdea and her set countenance, divined the purpose of the visit. At his signal, Sir Mungo and Pacuin left the room. Casmir jerked his finger at Father Umphred. "You may also go."

Father Umphred, smiling his kindly

smile, departed the chamber.

"Now then," said King Casmir, "what is the matter?"

In a tumble of words Queen Sollace explained the situation. King Casmir listened with stolid patience.

Sollace terminated her remarks. "You now will understand my concern. Essentially, we are puzzled as to why you threw

fruit at Lady Desdea and then encouraged Madouc to work the same mischief upon Lady Marmone."

Casmir spoke to Lady Desdea. "Bring Madouc here at once." Lady Desdea left the chamber and a few moments later returned with Madouc, who entered the room somewhat reluctantly.

King Casmir spoke in even tones. "I ordered you to throw no more fruit."

"Indeed you did, Sire, in the direction of Lady Desdea, and you also advised against the use of substances more offensive, in connection with Lady Desdea. I followed your advice exactly."

"But you threw a quince at Lady Marmone. Was that my advice?"

"I took it to be so, since you failed to include her in your instructions."

"Ah hah! Did you want me to name each individual of the castle and in each case name the stuffs with which he or she was not to be pelted?"

Madouc shrugged. "As you see, Sire, when there is doubt, mistakes occur."

"And you felt this doubt?"

"Exactly, Sire! It seemed only fair that each of the ladies should be treated alike, and enjoy the same advantages."

King Casmir smiled and nodded. "These

advantages are subtle. Can you bring them into sharper focus?"

Madouc frowned down at her fingers. "The explanation might be lengthy, even tedious, so that I would be committing the same fault I deplore in the Ladies Desdea and Marmone."

"Please make the effort. If you bore us, we will excuse you this once."

Madouc chose her words with care. "These ladies are surely genteel but each day their conduct is much like that of the day before. They know neither zest nor surprise nor any wonderful new events. I thought it might be well if they were



provided a mysterious adventure, which would excite their minds and reduce the tedium of their conversation."

"Your motives, then, were totally kind and sympathetic?"

Madouc turned him a dubious glance. "I suspected, of course, that at first they might not be grateful and perhaps even a bit gruff, but in the end they would be delighted for my help, since they would realize that the world is sometimes unexpected and strange, and they would start to look around them with gay anticipation."

Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone made

sounds of incredulity. Casmir smiled a small hard smile. "So you feel that you have done the two ladies a favor?"

"I have done my best," said Madouc bravely. "They will remember this day to the end of their lives! Can they say the same of yesterday?"

Casmir turned to Sollace. "The princess has made a persuasive case that both Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone will profit from her acts, even though they come in the form of sheer mischief. However, the altruism of the princess must be returned in kind, and I suggest that you make this day memorable for her as well, with the aid of a willow

whisk or a light ferrule. In the end, everyone will profit. Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone will find that their lives have been enriched, and Madouc will learn that she must obey the spirit as well as the letter of the royal command."

Madouc spoke in a voice which trembled slightly: "Sire, all is quite clear! Her Majesty need not exert herself to make a point which is already well taken."

King Casmir had already turned away, and spoke over his shoulder: "Events of this sort often take on a momentum of their own, as in the present case. Her Majesty may well work up a

perspiration but will suffer no real inconvenience. You have my leave to go."

Queen Sollace, with the Ladies Desdea and Marmone, departed the room.

Madouc lagged behind. Sollace turned and beckoned. "Come along-smartly now; nothing is to be gained by sulking."

Madouc sighed. "Ah well, I have nothing better to do."

The group returned to Sollace's parlour. Somewhere along the way Father Umphred emerged from the shadows and fell in behind.

Sollace settled herself comfortably on the sofa and summoned Ermelgart.

"Bring me three withes from a besom; let them be both stout and supple. Now then, Madouc! Attend me, if you will! Do you understand that your mischief has caused distress to us all?"

"The quinces were quite small," said Madouc.

"No matter! The deed does not become a royal princess: most especially a princess of Lyonesse."

Ermelgart returned with three willow withes, which she handed to Queen Sollace. Madouc watched with wide

blue eyes and mouth drooping in woe.

Sollace tested the action of the withes upon a cushion, then turned to Madouc. "Have you aught to say? Words of contrition or humility?"

Madouc, fascinated by the motion of the withes, failed to respond, and Queen Sollace, usually lethargic, became vexed. "You feel no remorse? Now I know why you are said to be impudent! Well then, Miss Sly-Puss, we shall see. You may approach."

Madouc licked her lips. "I do not think it sensible, if I am to be beaten for my pains."

Sollace stared in wonder. "I can hardly credit my ears. Father Umphred, kindly escort the princess to me."

The priest in all affability put his hand on Madouc's shoulder and urged her across the room. Sollace swept Madouc across her great lap, raised high the skirt of Madouc's frock, and plied the withes upon the narrow little haunches. Madouc lay limp as a rag, making no sound.

The lack of response annoyed Sollace; she struck again and again, and finally pulled down Madouc's smallclothes in order to belabor the naked buttocks, while Father Umphred looked on, smiling approval and nodding in time to

the strokes.

Madouc made no sound. Sollace at last becoming bored, threw down the withes, and pushed Madouc from her lap to her feet. Tight-faced, her mouth set in a thin white line, Madouc pulled up her undergarments, settled her skirt and started to walk from the room.

Sollace called out sharply: "I did not give you leave to go." Madouc halted and looked back over her shoulder. "Do you intend to beat me again?"

"Not at this moment. My arm is tired and sore."



"Then you are done with me." Madouc left the parlour, with Sollace blinking slack-jawed after her.

## II

Queen Sollace had been adversely affected by Madouc's conduct and also by her demeanour, which seemed deficient in the respect that Sollace conceived to be her due. She had long heard rumours in regard to Madouc's willfulness, but the firsthand experience came as something of a shock. If Madouc were to become a truly gracious maiden and an ornament to the court, then, clearly, remedial measures were

instantly necessary.

Queen Sollace discussed the problem with Father Umphred, who proposed that the little princess be allowed religious instruction. Lady Marmone scoffed at the idea. "That is most impractical and would waste everyone's time."

Queen Sollace, herself devout, was somewhat nettled. She demanded: "Then what action do you yourself advocate?"

"I have, for a fact, given the matter thought. The instruction must continue as before, with perhaps more emphasis upon the niceties of deportment. Further, it might be well if she were provided a

retinue of noble maidens, so that gracious conduct may be learned by force of example. She is almost to the age when you will be providing such a retinue in any case; I say, the sooner the better!"

Sollace gave a grudging nod. "It is perhaps a year or two early for such an arrangement, but the circumstances are special. Madouc is as brash and insolent as a little creature of the wild, and surely needs a restraining influence."

A week later Madouc was summoned to the morning parlour, on the second level of the East Tower. Here she was introduced to six noble damsels, who, so

she was told, would serve as her maids-in-waiting. Madouc, aware that protest was futile, stood back appraising her new companions and not liking what she saw. The six maidens were all dressed in fine garments and carried themselves with an exaggerated delicacy of poise. The six, after small formal curtsies, subjected Madouc to an inspection of their own, and showed no more enthusiasm than Madouc. They had been instructed in their duties, which most of them expected to be irksome. In general, they were to provide the princess companionship, run small errands at her behest, regale her with tidbits of gossip, and share the tedium of her lessons. At Madouc's pleasure, the damsels would

frolic together and play at quoits, jump-rope, catch-ball, blinko, mains, shuttlecock and battledore, and other such games; together they would sit at needlework, mix potpourris, compound sachets, weave flower garlands and learn the steps of those dances currently in vogue. All would take instructions in reading and writing; more importantly, they would be schooled in decorum, court convention, and the unalterable rules of precedence.

The six maidens were:

Devonet of Castle Folize.

Felice, daughter of Sir Mungo, the

High Seneschal.

Ydraint of Damar Greathouse.

Artwen of Kassie Keep.

Chlodys of the Fanistry.

Elissia of Yorn.

The six were a diverse group, all older than Madouc, save Felice, who was about her own age. Chlodys was large, blonde and somewhat ungainly; Elissia was small, dark and neat. Artwen was assertive; Felice was subdued, somewhat absent minded, unobtrusively pretty, if frail. Ydraint was both radiant

with health and definitely pretty; Devonet was beautiful. Chlodys and Ydraint were noticeably pubescent; Devonet and Artwen were somewhat less so; Felice and Elissia, like Madouc, were still at the threshold of change.

In fond theory the six maidens would accompany their adored princess everywhere, chattering merry nonsense, each vying to fulfill her little duties, overjoyed to hear her praise, penitent at her kindly censure. In effect, the six would form a miniature court of virtuous and joyful damsels, over whom Princess Madouc would reign serene, like a precious jewel in a golden setting.

In practice, the situation was different. From the first, Madouc was suspicious of the new arrangement, deeming it a nuisance which could only limit her freedom. The six maidens, in their turn, showed little zeal in the performance of their duties. Madouc was considered queer and eccentric, with no penchant whatever for style and naive to the point of vapidty.

The conditions of Madouc 's birth, as understood by the court, brought her no great prestige, which the maidens also were quick to perceive. After a few days of cautious formality, the maids formed a clique from which Madouc was pointedly excluded. Madouc thereafter



was treated to only a flippant pretense at courtesy; her inclinations were greeted with vacant stares; her remarks were lost in the chatter, or if heard were ignored.

Madouc was at first puzzled, then amused, then piqued, finally she decided that she cared not a whit, one way or the other and, as far as practical, followed her own pursuits.

Madouc's~detachment brought even greater disapproval from the maidens, who found her to be more peculiar than ever. The guiding spirit of the cabal was Devonet: a maiden dainty and graceful, fresh as a flower, already skilled in the

arts of charm. Glossy golden curls hung to her shoulders; her eyes were golden-hazel pools of innocence. Devonet was also competent at machinations and intrigues; at her signal-a twitch of the finger, a tilt of the head-the maidens would wander away from Madouc and gather in a huddle across the room, from which they would peer back at her over their shoulders, then whisper and giggle. On other occasions, they made a game of peeping around corners at Madouc, to jerk back when she looked up.

Madouc sighed, shrugged and ignored the mischief. One morning, while taking breakfast with her maid-in-attendance, Madouc discovered a dead mouse in her

bowl of porridge. She wrinkled her nose and drew back in distaste. Glancing around the table, she noted the covert attention of the six maidens; clearly they were aware of what she would find. Chlodys clapped a hand over her mouth to restrain a giggle; Devonet's gaze was limpid and bland.

Madouc pushed the bowl aside, pursed her lips, but made no comment.

Two days later Madouc-by a series of mysterious acts and feigned stealth-so aroused the curiosity of Devonet, Chlodys and Ydrait that they followed her surreptitiously in order to spy out the reason for her strange conduct. Clearly,

it could only be scandalous, and the potentialities were delicious indeed. So tempted, they followed Madouc to the top of the Tall Tower, and watched as Madouc climbed a ladder up to a range of abandoned dovecotes. When at last she descended the ladder and hurried off down the stairs, Devonet, Chlodys and Ydrant emerged from their hiding places, climbed the ladder, pushed through a trap door and cautiously explored the dovecotes. To their disappointment, there was nothing to be found but dust, dirt, a few feathers and a bad smell, but no evidence of depravity. Glumly they returned to the trapdoor, only to discover that the ladder had been removed, with the stone floor a daunting

twelve feet below.

At noon the absence of Devonet, Chlodys and Ydrant was noticed, to the general perplexity. Artwen, Elissia and Felice were questioned, but could supply no information. Lady Desdea put a sharp question to Madouc, who likewise professed puzzlement. "They are very lazy; perhaps they still lie asleep in their beds."

"Not likely!" said Lady Desdea crisply. "I find the situation most peculiar!"

"So do I," said Madouc. "I suspect that they are up to no good."

The day passed, and the night. Early the next morning, when all was still, a kitchen maid, crossing the service-yard, heard a thin wailing sound coming from a source she could not at once identify. She stopped to listen, and finally fixed upon the dove cotes at the top of the Tall Tower. She reported her findings to Dame Boudetta, the housekeeper, and the mystery was at last resolved. The three girls, dirty, frightened, cold and aggrieved, were rescued from their high prison. In hysterical voices they denounced Madouc and blamed her for all their discomfort. ("She wanted us to go hungry and starve!" "It was cold, and the wind blew, and we heard the ghost!"

"We were frightened! She did it all on purpose!")

Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone listened with stony faces, but were at a loss to adjudicate the situation. The issues were confused; further, if the case were brought to the attention of the queen, Madouc might well bring accusations of her own, in regard to dead mice in the porridge, for instance.

In the end, Chlodys, Ydraint and Devonet were brusquely advised that climbing around abandoned dovecotes was behavior unsuitable for highborn young ladies.

Up to this time, the affair of the rotten quinces, along with King Casmir's embarrassment and Madouc's subsequent travail, had been sternly suppressed. Now, through some clandestine source, the news reached the ears of the six maids-in-waiting,

to their delight. Over needlework, Devonet spoke softly: "What a sight, what a sight, when Madouc was beaten!"

"Kicking and squalling, bare bottom high!" said Chlodys quietly, as if awed by the thought.

"Was it truly so?" marvelled Artwen.



Devonet nodded primly. "Indeed! Did you not hear the dismal howling?"

"Everyone heard it," said Ydraint. "Still, no one knew where it came from."

"Everyone knows now," said Chlodys. "It was Madouc, roaring like a sick cow!"

Elissia spoke with sly mirth: "Princess Madouc, you are so quiet! Are you discontented with our conversation?"

"Not altogether. I am amused by your jokes. Sometime you shall repeat them for me."

"How so?" asked Devonet, puzzled and alert.

"Can you not imagine? Someday I will marry a great king and sit on a golden throne. At that time I may well command the six of you to my court, that you may produce some of this 'dismal howling' which seems to be so amusing."

The maidens fell uneasily silent. Devonet was the first to recover her composure. She gave a tinkle of laughter. "It is not certain, nor even likely, that you shall marry a king-since you have no pedigree! Chlodys, has Princess Madouc a pedigree?"

"No pedigree whatever, poor thing."

Madouc asked innocently: "What is a pedigree?"

Devonet laughed again. "It is something you do not have! Perhaps we should not tell you this, but truth is truth! You have no father! Elissia, what is a girl who lacks a father?"

"She is a bastard."

"Exactly true! Sad to say, the Princess Madouc is a bastard, and no one will ever want to marry her!"

Chlodys gave an exaggerated shudder. "I

am glad that I am not a bastard."

"But you are wrong," said Madouc in a voice of sweet reason. "I do have a father. He is dead, or so it is said, along with my mother."

Devonet spoke with disdain: "Perhaps he is dead, perhaps not. They threw him into a hole, and there he is today. He was a vagabond, and no one even troubled to ask his name."

"In any event," said Chlodys, "you lack a pedigree, and so you shall never marry. It is hard news, but it is best that you learn the facts now, so that you may become inured to them."

"Just so," said Ydrait. "We tell you this because it is our duty to do so."

Madouc controlled the quaver in her voice. "It is your duty to tell only the truth."

"Ah, but we have done so!" declared Devonet.

"I do not believe it!" said Madouc. "My father was a noble knight, since I am his daughter! How could it be otherwise?"

Devonet looked Madouc up and down, then said: "Very easily."

### III

Madouc had no sure understanding as to what might be a 'pedigree'. She had heard the word used once or twice before, but its exact significance had never been made clear. A few days past she had gone to the stables to groom her pony Tyfer; nearby a pair of gentlemen were discussing a horse and its 'fine pedigree'. The horse, a black stallion, had been notably well-hung; but this would not seem to be the determining factor, and certainly not so far as Madouc was concerned. Devonet and the other maidens could not reasonably expect her to flaunt an article of this sort.

It was all very puzzling. Perhaps the gentlemen had been alluding to the

quality of the horse's tail. As before, and for much the same reason, Madouc rejected the theory. She decided to speculate no further but to make inquiries at the first opportunity.

Madouc was on tolerably good terms with Prince Cassander, only son to King Casmir and Queen Sollace, and heir-apparent to the crown of Lyonesse. Cassander over the years had become something of a gay blade. His physique was robust. Under tight blond curls his face was round, with small stiff features and round blue eyes. From his father Cassander had inherited, or had learned, a whole set of curt gestures and habits of command; from Sollace had come his

fine pale pink skin, small hands and feet, and a temperament easier and more flexible than that of King Casmir.

Madouc discovered Cassander sitting alone in the orangery, writing with concentration upon a parchment with a quill pen. Madouc stood watching a moment. Did Cassander spend his energies upon poetry? Song? An amorous ode? Cassander, looking up, caught sight of Madouc. He put his pen aside and dropped the parchment into a box.

Madouc slowly approached. Cassander seemed in a jovial mood, and gave Madouc a heavily facetious greeting:



"Hail and thrice hail, to the avenging Fury of the castle, clothed in darts and spasms of purple lightning! Who will be next to know the sting of your awful wrath? Or-I should say-the impact of your overripe quinces?"

Madouc smiled wanly and settled herself upon the bench beside Cassander. "His Majesty has issued exact orders; I may no longer do what needs to be done." Madouc sighed. "I have decided to obey."

"That is a wise decision."

Madouc went on, in a wistful voice. "One would think that, as a royal

princess, I might be entitled to throw quince in what ever direction and as often as I chose."

"So one might think, but the act is not considered decorous, and above all, decorum is the duty of a royal princess!"

"What of my mother, the Princess Suldrun-was she decorous?"

Cassander, raising his eyebrows, slanted a quizzical glance down upon Madouc.

"What an odd question! How should I answer? In all honesty, I would be forced to say something like: 'not altogether'."

"Because she lived alone in a garden?  
Or because I was born to her when she  
was not married?"

"Neither form of conduct is considered  
truly decorous."

Madouc pursed her lips. "I want to know  
more about her, but no one will speak.  
Why is there so much mystery?"

Cassander laughed ruefully. "There is a  
mystery because no one knows what  
went on."

"Tell me what you know of my father."

Cassander said ponderously: "I can tell

you next to nothing because that is all I know. Apparently he was a handsome young vagabond who chanced to find Suidrun alone in the garden and imposed himself upon her lonely condition."

"Maybe she was glad to see him."

Cassander spoke with unconvincing primness: "She acted without decorum, and only that may be said for Suldrun. But his was insolent conduct! He made a fleeting mockery of our royal dignity, and well deserved his fate."

Madouc reflected. "It is very odd. Did Suldrun complain of my father's conduct?"

Cassander frowned. "By no means! The poor little wight seems to have loved him. But tush! I know little of the affair, except that it was the priest Umphred who found the two together and brought the news to His Majesty."

"My poor father was punished terribly," said Madouc. "I cannot understand the reason."

Again Cassander spoke virtuously: "The reason is clear! It was necessary to teach the churl a stern lesson, and to discourage all others of like mind."

With a sudden quiver in her voice Madouc asked: "Is he then still alive?"

"That I doubt."

"Where is the hole into which he was cast?"

Cassander jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "In the rocks behind the Peinhador. The oubliette is a hundred feet deep with a dark little cell at the bottom. It is where incorrigible criminals and enemies of the state are punished."

Madouc looked up the hill to where the gray roof of the Peinhador could be glimpsed behind Zoltra Bright-Star's Wall. "My father would be neither of those."

Cassander shrugged. "Such was the royal justice, and doubtless correct."

"Still, my mother was a royal princess! She would not have loved just anyone who happened to look over the fence."

Cassander shrugged, to indicate the puzzle took him beyond his depth. "So it would seem; I grant you that. Still—who knows? Royal princess or not, Suldrun was a girl, and girls are female, and females are as wayward as dandelion fluff in the wind! Such is my experience."

"Perhaps my father was highborn," Madouc mused. "No one troubled to

ask."

"Unlikely," said Cassander. "He was a foolish young rogue who received his just deserts. You are not convinced?"

This is

the law of nature! Each person is born into his proper place, which he must keep, unless his king grants him advancement for valor in war. No other system is proper, right, or natural."

"What then of me?" asked Madouc in a troubled voice. "Where is my 'pedigree'?"

Cassander gave a bark of laughter. "Who



knows? You have been granted the status of a royal princess; that should suffice."

Madouc was still dissatisfied. "Was my father put into the hole along with his 'pedigree'?"

Cassander chuckled. "If he had one to begin with."

"But what is it? Something like a tail?"

Cassander could not restrain his mirth and Madouc indig antly rose to her feet and walked away.

## IV

The royal family of Lyonesse often rode out from Haidion into the countryside: to join a hunt, or to indulge the king's taste for falconry or simply to enjoy a pastoral excursion. King Casmir usually rode his black charger Sheuvan, while Sollace sat a gentle white pairfre, or, as often as not, the cushioned seat of the well-sprung royal carriage. Prince Cassander rode his fine prancing roan Gildrup; the Princess Madouc ranged happily here and there on her dappled pony Tyfer.

Madouc noted that many highborn ladies doted on their steeds and frequently visited the stables to pet and nourish their darlings with apples and

sweetmeats. Madouc began to do likewise, bringing carrots and turnips for Tyfer's delectation, meanwhile evading the surveillance of both Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone, and also escaping her six maids-in-waiting.

The stableboy assigned to the care of Tyfer was Pymfyd: a tow-headed lad of twelve or thirteen, strong and willing, with an honest countenance and an obliging disposition. Madouc convinced him that he had also been appointed to serve as her personal attendant and escort when the need arose. Without demur Pymfyd acceded to the arrangement, which seemed to signalize an advancement in status.

Early one afternoon, with the overcast hanging low and the scent of rain in the air, Madouc donned a gray hooded cloak and slipped away to the stables. She summoned Pymfyd from his work with the manure fork. "Come, Pymfyd, at once! I have an errand which will require an hour or so of my time, and I will need your attendance."

Pymfyd asked cautiously: "What sort of errand, Your High ness?"

"In due course you will learn all that is necessary. Come then! The day is short; the hours tumble past, while you doodle and dither."

Pymfyd gave a sour grunt. "Will you be wanting Tyfer?"

"Not today." Madouc turned away.

"Come."

With something of a flourish Pymfyd plunged his manure fork into the dungheap and followed Madouc on laggard steps.

Madouc marched up the path that led around the back of the castle, with Pymfyd trudging behind.

He called out: "Where are we going?"

"It will soon be made clear to you."

"As you say, Your Highness," grumbled Pymfyd.

The path veered to the left, toward the Sfer Arct; here Madouc swung away to the right, to scramble up the hillside along a trail leading up the stony slope toward the gray bulk of the Peinhador.

Pymfyd voiced a querulous protest, which Madouc ignored. She continued up the slope, with the north wall of the Peinhador looming above. Pymfyd, panting and apprehensive, lunged forward in sudden alarm and caught up with Madouc. "Princess, where are you taking us? Below those walls criminals crouch in their dungeons!"

"Pymfyd, are you a criminal?"

"By no manner or means!"

"Then you need fear nothing!"

"Not so! The innocent are often dealt the most vicious blows."

"Allow me to do the worrying, Pymfyd, and in any case we shall hope for the best."

"Your Highness, I suggest-"

Madouc brought to bear the full force of her blue gaze. "Not another word, if you please."

Pymfyd threw his arms in the air. "As you will."

Madouc turned away with dignity and continued up the slope beside the black masonry walls of the Peinhador. Pymfyd came sullenly behind.

At the corner of the structure Madouc halted and surveyed the grounds at the back of the Peinhador. At the far end, at a distance of fifty yards, stood a massive gibbet and several other machines of grim purpose, as well as three iron posts for the burning of miscreants, a firepit and griddle used for a similar purpose. Closer at hand, only a few yards distant, at the back of a barren area Madouc



discovered what she had come to find: a circular stone wall three feet high surrounding an opening five feet in diameter.

Step by slow step, and despite Pymfyd's inarticulate mutter of protest, Madouc crossed the stony barrens to the circular wall and peered down into the black depths below. She listened, but heard nothing. She pitched her voice so that it might be heard in the black depths and called: "Father! Can you hear me?" She listened: no sound returned. "Father, are you there? It is Madouc, your daughter!"

Pymfyd, scandalized by Madouc's acts, came up behind her. "What are you

doing? This is not proper conduct, either for you or for me!"

Madouc paid him no heed. Leaning over the opening she called again: "Can you hear me? It has been a very long time! Are you still alive? Please speak to me! It is your daughter Madouc!"

From the darkness below came only profound silence.

Pymfyd's imagination was not of a far-ranging nature; nevertheless he conceived that the stillness was not ordinary, but rather that where listeners quietly held their breath. He tugged at Madouc's arm and spoke in a husky

whisper: "Princess, there is a strong smell of ghosts to this place! Listen with a keen ear, you can hear them chittering down deep in the darkness."

Madouc cocked her head and listened. "Bah! I hear no ghosts."

"You are not listening with proper ears! Come away now, before they rob us of our senses!"

"Do not talk nonsense, Pymfyd! King Casmir dropped my father down this hole, and I must learn if he still lives."

Pymfyd peered down the shaft. "Nothing down there lives. In any case, it is royal

business, beyond our scope!"

"Not so! Is it not my father who was immured?"

"No matter; he is no less dead."

Madouc nodded sadly. "So I fear. But I suspect that he left some memorial as to his name and pedigree. If nothing else, this is what I wish to know."

Pymfyd gave his head a decisive shake. "It is not possible; now let us go."

Madouc paid no heed. "Look, Pymfyd! On yonder gibbet hangs a rope. With this rope we will lower you down the shaft

to the bottom. The light will be poor, but you must look about to see what has transpired and what records remain."

Pymfyd stared, mouth gaping in wonder. He stuttered: "Have I heard rightly? You intend that I should descend into the hole? The idea lacks merit."

"Come, Pymfyd, be quick! Surely you value my good opinion! Run to the gibbet and fetch the rope."

A step grated on the stony ground; the two jerked around to find a ponderous silhouette looming against the gray overcast. Pymfyd sucked in his breath; Madouc's jaw sagged.

The dark shape stepped forward; Madouc recognized Zerling the Chief Executioner. He halted, to stand heavy legs apart, arms behind his back.

Madouc previously had seen Zerling only from a distance, and the sight had always brought her a morbid little shiver. Now he stood looking down at her, and Madouc stared back in awe; Zerling's semblance was not the more lightsome for proximity. He was massive and muscular, so that he seemed almost squat. His face was heavy, with skin of a curious brownish-red color, and fringed all around with a tangle of black hair and black beard. He wore pantaloons of sour black leather and a

black canvas doublet; a round leather cap was pulled low over his ears. He looked back and forth between Madouc and Pymfyd. "Why do you come here, where we do our grim deeds? It is no place for your games."

Madouc responded in a clear treble voice: "I am not here for games."

"Ha!" said Zerling. "Whatever the case, Princess, I suggest that you leave at once."

"Not yet! I came here for a purpose."

"And what might that be?"

"I want to know what happened to my father."

Zerling's features compressed into a frown of perplexity. "Who was he? I have no recollection."

"Surely you remember. He loved my mother, the Princess Suldrun. For punishment, the king ordered him dropped into this very hole. If he still lives, I want to know, so that I might beg His Majesty for mercy."

From the depths of Zerling's chest came a mournful chuckle. "Call down the hole as you like, by day or by night! You will hear never a whisper, or even a sigh."



"He is dead?"

"He went below long ago," said Zerling. "Down in the dark folk do not hold hard to life. It is cold and damp, and there is nothing to do but regret one's crimes."

Madouc looked at the oubliette, mouth drooping wistfully. "What was he like? Do you remember?"

Zerling glanced over his shoulder. "It is not my place to notice, nor to ask, nor to remember. I lop heads and heave at the windlass; still, when I go home of nights I am a different man and cannot so much as kill a chicken for the pot."

"All very well, but what of my father?"

Zerling glanced once more over his shoulder. "This perhaps should not be said, and your father committed an atrocious act-"

Madouc spoke plaintively: "I cannot think it so, since I would not be here otherwise."

Zerling blinked. "These questions are beyond my competence; I confine my energies to drawing entrails and working the gibbet. Royal justice, by its very nature, is at all times correct. I must say that in this case I wondered at its severity, when a mere cropping of ears

and nose, with perhaps a taste or two of the snake, would seem to have sufficed."

"So it seems to me," said Madouc. "Did you speak with my father?"

"I remember no conversation."

"What of his name?"

"No one troubled to ask. Put the subject out of your mind: that is my best advice."

"But! want to learn my pedigree. Everyone has one but me."

"You will find no pedigree in yonder hole! So now: be off with you, before I hang up young Pymfyd by his toes, just to

maintain order!"

Pymfyd cried out: "Come along, Your Highness! No more can be done!"

"But we have done nothing!"

Pymfyd, already out of earshot, failed to respond.

V

One bright morning Madouc came briskly along Haidion's main gallery and into the entry hall. Looking through the open portal and across the front terrace, she noticed Prince Cassander leaning against the balustrade, contemplating the

town below and eating purple plums from a silver dish. Madouc looked quickly over her shoulder, then ran across the terrace and joined him.

Cassander glanced at her sidelong, first carelessly, then a second time, with eyebrows raised in surprise. "By Astarte's nine nymphs!" swore Cassander. "Here is a definite marvel!"

"What is so marvellous?" asked Madouc. "That I deign to join you?"

"Of course not! I refer to your costume!"

Madouc looked indifferently down at herself. Today she wore a demure white

frock with green and blue flowers embroidered along the hem, with a white ribbon constraining her copper-gold curls. "It is well enough, or so I suppose."

Cassander spoke in fulsome tones. "I see before me, not a wild-eyed scalawag escaping a dogfight, but a royal princess of delicacy and grace! Indeed, you are almost pretty."

Madouc gave a wry laugh. "It is not my fault. They dressed me willy-filly, so that I might be fit for the cotillion."

"And that is so inglorious?"

"Not altogether, since I will not be there."

"Aha! You run grave risks! Lady Desdea will be rigid with vexation!"

"She must learn to be more reasonable. If she likes dancing, well and good; it is all the same to me. She may jig, jerk, kick high in the air and jump in a circle, so long as I may do other wise. That is reasonable conduct!"

"But it is not the way things go! Everyone must learn to act properly; no one is exempt, not even I."

"Why, then, are you not at the cotillion,

sweating and hopping with the others?"

"I have had my share of it-never fear! It is now your turn."

"I will have none of it, and this is what Lady Desdea must get through her head."

Cassander chuckled. "Such mutiny might easily earn you another beating."

Madouc gave her head a scornful toss.

"No matter! I shall utter not a sound, and they will quickly tire of their sport."

Cassander uttered a bark of laughter.

"Wrong, in every respect! I discussed this same topic only last week with



Tanchet the under-torturer. He states that voluble types who instantly screech and blubber and make horrid noises-these are the ones who fare the best, since the torturer is quickly satisfied that his job has been well and truly done. Take my advice! A few shrill screams and a convulsion or two might save your skin a whole medley of tingles!"

"This bears thinking about," said Madouc.

"Or-from a different perspective-you might try to be mild and meek, and avoid the beatings altogether."

Madouc gave her head a dubious shake.

"My mother, the Princess Suldrun, was mild and meek, but failed to escape an awful penalty-which the poor creature never deserved. That is my opinion."

Cassander spoke in measured tones:  
"Suldrun disobeyed the king's command, and had only herself to blame."

"Nevertheless, it seems very harsh treatment to visit upon one's own dear daughter."

Cassander was not comfortable with the topic. "Royal justice is not for us to question."

Madouc gave Cassander a cool

appraisal. He frowned down at her.

"Why do you stare at me so?"

"Someday you will be king."

"That well may be-later, so I hope, rather than sooner. I am in no haste to rule."

"Would you treat your daughter in such a fashion?"

Cassander pursed his lips. "I would do what I thought to be correct and kingly."

"And if I were still unmarried, would you try to wed me to some fat bad-smelling prince, so as to make me

miserable the rest of my life?"

Cassander gave an exclamation of annoyance. "Why ask such pointless questions? You will be of age long before I wear the crown. Your marriage will be arranged by someone other than me."

"Small chance of that," said Madouc under her breath.

"I did not hear your remark."

"No matter. Do you often visit the old garden where my mother died?"

"I have not done so for years."

"Take me there now."

"Now? When you should be at the cotillion?"

"No time could be more convenient."

Cassander looked toward the palace, and seeing no one, gave a flippant wave of the hand. "I should stand aloof from your vagaries! Still, at the moment I have nothing better to do. Come then, while Lady Desdea is yet dormant. I do not take kindly to complaints and reproaches."

Madouc said wisely: "I have learned the best response. I feign a blank stupid

perplexity, so that they weary themselves with explanations, and forget all else."

"Ah Madouc, you are a crafty one! Come then, before we are apprehended."

The two set off up the cloistered way toward Zoltra Bright-Star's Wall: up past the orangery, through the wall itself by a dank passage and out upon the parade ground at the front of the Peinhador: a place known as 'The Urquial'. To the right, the wall veered sharply to the south; in the angle, a thicket of larch and juniper concealed a decaying postern of black timber.

Cassander, already beset by second thoughts, pushed through the thicket, cursing the brambles and the drift of pollen from the larches. He thrust at the postern and grunted at the recalcitrance of the sagging timbers. Putting his shoulder to the wood, he heaved hard; with a dismal groaning of corroded iron hinges the postern swung open. Cassander gave a grim nod of triumph for his victory over the obstacle. He beckoned to Madouc. "Behold! The secret garden!"

The two stood at the head of a narrow vale, sloping down to a little crescent of beach. At one time the garden had been landscaped after the classic Arcadian

style, but now grew rank and wild with trees and shrubs of many sorts: oak, olive, laurel, bay and myrtle; hydrangea, heliotrope, asphodel, vervane, purple thyme. Halfway down to the beach a clutter of marble blocks and a few standing columns indicated the site of an ancient Roman villa. The single whole structure to be seen was near at hand: a small chapel, now dank with lichen and the odor of wet stone.

Cassander pointed to the stone chapel. "That is where Suldrun took shelter from the weather. She spent many lonely nights in that small place."

He gave his head a wry shake. "And also



a few nights not so lonely, which cost her dear in grief and sorrow."

Madouc blinked at the tears which had come to her eyes and turned away.

Cassander said gruffly: "The events are many years gone; one should not mourn forever."

Madouc looked down the long descent of the garden. "It was my mother, whom I never knew, and it was my father, who was put in a hole to die! How can I forget so easily?"

Cassander shrugged. "I don't know. I can only assure you that your emotion is wasted. Do you wish to see more of the

garden?"

"Let us follow the path and find where it leads."

"It goes here and there, and finally down to the beach. Suldrun whiled away her days paving the path with pebbles from the beach. Rains have undone the path; there is little to show for her work-or her life, for that matter."

"Except me."

"Except you! A notable accomplishment, to be sure!"

Madouc ignored the joculariry, which

she found to be in rather poor taste.

Cassander said thoughtfully, "For a fact, you are not at all like her. Evidently, you resemble your father, whoever or whatever he might have been."

Madouc spoke with feeling: "Since my mother loved him, he was surely a person of high estate and noble character! Nevertheless, they call me 'bastard' and insist that I have no pedigree."

Cassander frowned. "Who commits such discourtesy?"

"The six maidens who attend me."

Cassander was shocked. "Really! They all seem so sweet and pretty-Devonet in particular!"

"She is the worst; in fact, she is a little serpent."

Cassander's displeasure had lost its edge. "Ah well, girls can be saucy at times. The facts, sadly enough, cannot be denied. Do you care to go further?"

Madouc halted in the path. "Had Suldrun no friends to help her?"

"None who dared defy the king. The priest Umphred came occasionally; he said he wanted her for Christianity. I

suspect he wanted her for something else, which was no doubt denied him. Perhaps for this reason he betrayed her to the king."

"So Priest Umphred was the traitor."

"I suppose he thought it his duty."

Madouc nodded, assimilating the information. "Why did she stay? I would have been over the wall and away inside the hour."

"Knowing you, I well believe it! Suldrun, as I remember her, was of a dreamy gentle cast."

"Still, she need not have remained here. Had she no spirit?"

Cassander considered. "I suppose that she hoped always for the king's forgiveness. If she ran away, what then? She had no taste for filth or hunger, nor the cold wind by night, nor the certainty of rape."

Madouc was uncertain as to the exact meaning of the word. "What is 'rape'?"

Cassander explained in lofty terms. Madouc compressed her lips. "That is boorish conduct! If it were tried on me, I would not tolerate it for a moment, and I certainly would have some thing very

sharp to say!"

"Suldrun also disliked the idea," said Cassander. "So ends the story, and nothing remains but memories and Princess Madouc. Have you seen enough of this old garden?"

Madouc looked all around. "It is quiet here, and eery. The world is far away. By moonlight it must be sad, and so beautiful as to break one's heart. I want never to come here again."

An under-maid informed Lady Desdea of Madouc 's return to the castle, in the company of Prince Cassander.

Lady Desdea was taken aback. Her intent had been to chide the little minx at some length and then ordain six punitive hours of dancing lessons. Prince Cassander's participation totally altered the case. To punish Madouc would imply criticism of Prince Cassander, and Lady Desdea was chary of such a risk. One day Cassander would become king, and kings were notoriously long of memory.

Lady Desdea turned on her heel and marched to the queen's parlour, where she found Sollace relaxing among her cushions while Father Umphred read psalms in sonorous Latin from a scroll. Sollace understood none of the sense,



but she found Father Umphred's voice soothing, and meanwhile she refreshed herself with curds and honey from a bowl.

Lady Desdea stood impatiently to the side until Father Umphred completed his reading; then, in response to Sollace's inquiring nod, she told of Madouc's latest delinquency.

Sollace listened without emotion, supping all the while from her bowl.

Lady Desdea warmed to her subject. "I am bewildered! Rather than acting in accordance with my instructions, she chose to saunter here and there with

Prince Cassander, heedless of the arrangements. Were her rank less exalted, one could almost think her controlled by a cacodaemon, or an esper or some other malignant entity! Such is the perversity of the child."

Queen Sollace failed to become exercised. "She is a trifle wayward; no doubt as to that."

Lady Desdea's voice rose in pitch. "I am at my wit's end! She does not even trouble to defy me; she simply pays me no heed. I might as well be talking out the window!"

"I will reprimand the child later this

afternoon," said Queen Sollace. "Or perhaps tomorrow, if I decide to beat her. At the moment, I have a dozen other matters on my mind."

Father Umphred cleared his throat. "Perhaps Your Highness will allow me a suggestion."

"Of course! I value your counsel!"

Father Umphred placed the tips of his fingers together. "Lady Desdea alluded to the possibility of an alien influence. All taken with all, I think this unlikely-but not beyond the realm of imagination, and the Holy Church recognizes such afflictions. As a precaution I would

suggest that the Princess Madouc be baptized into the Christian faith and thereupon be instructed in the tenets of orthodoxy. The routines of devotion, meditation and prayer will gently but surely persuade her to those virtues of obedience and humility which we so long to inculcate in her."

Queen Sollace put aside the empty bowl. "The idea has merit, but I wonder if the Princess Madouc would find such a program appealing."

Father Umphred smiled. "A child is the last to appreciate what is pure and good. If Princess Madouc finds the environment of Haidion too stimulating,

we can send her to the convent at Bulmer Skeme. The Mother Superior is both thorough and rigorous when the need exists."

Queen Sollace sank back into the cushions of the couch. "I will discuss the matter with the king."

Sollace waited until King Casmir had taken his supper, and had become somewhat mellow with wine; then, as if casually, she brought Madouc's name into the conversation. "Have you heard the latest? Madouc is not behaving as I might hope."

"Ah bah," growled King Casmir. "It is

no great matter. I am bored with this constant recital."

"It is a subject not to be dismissed lightly. With full and insolent purpose she defied the instructions of Lady Desdea! Father Umphred is convinced that Madouc should be baptized and trained in Christian doctrine."

"Eh? What nonsense is this?"

"It is scarcely nonsense," said Sollace. "Lady Desdea is beside herself with anxiety; she suspects that Madouc is moonstruck or possibly possessed by a familiar."

"Absurd! The girl is full of nervous energy." For a variety of reasons, Casmir had never informed Sollace of Madouc's provenance, nor the fact of her fairy blood. He said gruffly: "She is a bit odd, perhaps, but no doubt she will grow out of it."

"Father Umphred believes that Madouc is definitely in need of religious guidance and I agree."

Casmir's voice took on an edge: "You are far too amiable with that fat priest! I will send him away if he does not keep his opinions to himself!"

Sollace said stiffly: "We are concerned

only for the salvation of Madouc's eternal soul!"

"She is a clever little creature; let her worry about her own soul."

"Hmf," said Sollace. "Whoever marries Madouc will be getting far more than he bargained for."

King Casmir gave a frosty chuckle. "You are correct on this account, for more reasons than one! In any event we will be off to Sarris in a week's time and everything will be changed."

"Lady Desdea will have more difficulty than ever," said Sollace with a sniff.



"Madouc will run wild as a hare."

"Lady Desdea must then give chase, if she is truly in earnest."

"You minimize the difficulties," said Sollace. "As for me, I find Sarris tiresome enough, without added exasperation."

"The country air will do you a benefit," said Casmir. "We shall all enjoy Sarris."

# CHAPTER THREE

## I

Each summer King Casmir moved with household and court to Sarris, a rambling old mansion about forty miles northeast of Lyonesse Town. The site, beside the River Glame, in a region of gently rolling parldand, was most pleasant. Sarris itself made no pretensions either to elegance or grandeur. Queen Sollace, for one, found the amenities at Sarris much inferior to those at Haidion, and described Sarris as 'a great overgrown barn of a farmhouse'. She also decried the rustic

informality which, despite her best efforts, pervaded life at Sarris and which, in her opinion, diminished the dignity of the court and, further, infected the servants with slackness.

There was little society at Sarris, other than an occasional banquet at which King Casmir entertained certain of the local gentry, most of whom Queen Sollace found tedious. She often spoke to King Casmir of her boredom: "In essence, I do not enjoy living like a peasant, with animals braying through the windows of my bedchamber and every cock of the fowl-run crying out alarums each morning before dawn."

King Casmir turned a deaf ear to the complaints. Sarris was sufficiently convenient for the conduct of state business; for sport he played his falcons and hunted his parldands, or at times, when the chase was hot, he ranged far beyond, sometimes into the fringes of Forest Tantrevalles, only a few miles to the north.

The rest of the royal household also found Sarris to their taste. Prince Cassander was attended by convivial comrades; daily they amused themselves riding abroad, or boating on the river, or practicing the sport of jousting, which recently had become fashionable. During the evening they fancied sport of another

kind, in association with certain merry girls of the locality, using an abandoned gamekeeper's cottage for their venue.

Princess Madouc also took pleasure in the move, which, if nothing else, delivered her from the attendance of her six maids-in-waiting. Her pony Tyfer was ready at hand; every day she rode happily out on the meadows, with Pymfyd for her groom. Not all circumstances were halcyon; she was expected to comport herself in a style befitting her place. Madouc, however, paid little heed to the circumscriptions imposed by Lady Desdea, and followed her own inclinations.

Lady Desdea at last took Madouc aside for an earnest discussion. "My dear, it is time and past time that reality enters your life! You must accept the fact that you are the Princess Madouc of Lyonesse, not some vulgar little ruffian girl, with neither rank nor responsibility!"

"Very well, Lady Desdea; I will remember this. Can I go now?"

"Not yet; in fact, I am barely started. I am trying to point out that each of your acts redounds to the credit, or discredit, not only of yourself and the royal family, but of the entire kingdom! It is awesome to think about! Are you quite clear on

this?"

"Yes, Lady Desdea. And yet-"

"And yet-what?"

"No one seems to notice my conduct but you. So it makes little difference after all, and the kingdom is not in danger."

"It makes a great deal of difference!" snapped Lady Desdea. "Bad habits are easy to learn and hard to forget! You must learn the gracious good habits that will make you admired and respected!"

Madouc gave a doubtful assent. "I do not think anyone will ever admire my

needlework or respect my dancing."

"Nevertheless, these are skills and graces which you must learn, and learn well! Time is advancing; the days go by; the months become years while you are not even noticing. Before long there will be talk of betrothals, and then you and your conduct will be the subject of the most minute scrutiny and the most careful analysis."

Madouc gave a disdainful grimace. "If anyone scrutinizes me, they will need no analysis to discover what I think of them."

"My dear, that is not the proper attitude."



"No matter; I want nothing to do with such things. They must look elsewhere for their betrothals."

Lady Desdea chuckled grimly. "Do not be too positive too soon, since surely you will change your mind. In any case, I expect you to start practicing genteel conduct."

"It would be a waste of time."

"Indeed? Consider this case. A noble prince comes to Lyonesse, hoping to meet a princess modest and pure, of charm and delicacy. He asks: 'And where is Princess Madouc, who, so I expect, is beautiful, kind and good?' For

answer they point out the window and say: 'There she goes now!' He looks out the window and sees you running past, helter-skelter, hair like red rope, with all the charm and grace of a banshee from hell! What then?"

"If the prince is wise, he will order up his horse and leave at once." Madouc jumped to her feet. "Are you finished? If so, I will be happy to leave."

"Go."

Lady Desdea sat still and stiff for ten minutes. Then, abruptly, she rose to her feet and marched to the queen's boudoir. She found Sollace sitting with her hands

in a slurry of powdered chalk and milk of milkweed, by which she hoped to mitigate the effects of the country water.

Queen Sollace looked up from the basin of slurry. "So then, Ottilie! What a face you show me! Is it despair, or grief, or simple intestinal cramp?"

"You misread my mood, Your Highness! I have just spoken with Princess Madouc and now I must make a discouraging report."

Sollace sighed. "Again? I am becoming apathetic when her name is mentioned! She is in your hands. Teach her the proprieties and a few graces, together

with dancing and needlework; that is enough. In a few years we will marry her off. Until then, we must bear with her oddities."

"If she were only 'odd', as you put it, I could deal with her. Instead she has become a full-fledged tomboy, and is intractable to boot. She swims the river where I can not venture; she climbs the trees and hides from my call in the foliage. Her favorite resort is the stables; always she stinks of horse. I know not how to control her."

Sollace pulled her hand from the slurry and decided that the treatment had worked its best effect. Her maid started

to wipe away the paste, prompting an outcry from Sollace: "Take care, Nelda! You are flaying me alive with your strenuous work! Do you think I am made of leather?"

"I am sorry, Your Highness. I will be more careful. Your hands are now truly beautiful!"

Queen Sollace gave a grudging nod. "That is why I endure such hardships. What were you saying, Ottilie?"

"What shall be done with Princess Madouc?"

Sollace looked up blankly, eyes large

and bovine. "I am not quite clear on her fault."

"She is undisciplined, free as a lark and not always tidy. There are smuts on her face and straws in her hair, if that flying red tousle deserves the word. She is careless, impudent, willful and wild."

Queen Sollace sighed once again and selected a grape from the bowl at her elbow. "Convey my displeasure to the princess and explain that I will be satisfied only with her proper deportment."

"I have already done so ten times. I might as well be talking to the wind."

"Hmf. She is no doubt as bored as I. This rusticity is maddening. Where are the little maids who attend her so nicely at Haidion? They are so dainty and sweet and nice; Madouc would surely profit from their example."

"So one might imagine, in the ordinary case."

Queen Sollace chose another grape.

"Send off for two or three of these maidens. Indicate that they are to guide Madouc in a gentle and discreet fashion. Time rushes on, and already we must look to the future!"

"Just so, Your Highness!"

"Who is that little blond maiden, so winsome and full of pretty wiles? She is like myself at her age."

"That would be Devonet, daughter to Duke Malnoyard Odo of Castle Folize."

"Let us have her here at Sarris, and another as well. Who shall it be?"

"Either Ydrait or Chlodys; I think Chlodys, who is some what more durable. I will make arrangements at once. Still, you must expect no miracles."

A week later Devonet and Chlodys arrived at Sarris and were instructed by



Lady Desdea. She spoke dryly: "The country air has affected Princess Madouc strangely, as if it were a vital tonic, perhaps to her excessive invigoration. She has become careless of decorum, and is also somewhat flighty. We hope that she will profit by the example you set for her, and possibly your carefully phrased advice."

Devonet and Chlodys went to join Madouc. After long search they found her perched high in a cherry tree, plucking and eating plump red cherries.

Madouc saw the two without pleasure. "I thought that you had gone to your homes for the summer. Are they tired of

you so soon?"

"Not at all," said Devonet with dignity.  
"We are here by royal invitation."

Chlodys said: "Her Highness feels that you need proper companionship."

"Ha," said Madouc. "No one asked me what I wanted."

"We are supposed to set you a good example," said Devonet. "As a start, I will point out that a lady of refinement would not wish to be found so high in a tree."

"Then I am a lady of refinement well and

truly," said Madouc, "since I did not wish to be found."

Chlodys looked speculatively up into the branches. "Are the cherries ripe?"

"Quite ripe."

"Are they good?"

"Very good indeed."

"Since they are handy, you might pick a few for us."

Madouc selected two cherries and dropped them into Chlodys' hands.

"Here are some the birds have pecked."

Chlodys looked at the cherries with a wrinkled nose. "Are there none better?"

"Certainly. If you climb the tree you can pick them."

Devonet tossed her head. "I don't care to soil my clothes."

"As you like."

Devonet and Chlodys moved to the side, where they settled themselves carefully in the grass and spoke in low voices. Occasionally they glanced up toward Madouc and giggled as if at some ludicrous consideration.

Madouc presently climbed down through the branches and jumped to the ground.

"How long will you stay at Sarris?"

"We are here at the queen's pleasure," said Devonet. She looked Madouc up and down, and laughed incredulously.

"You are wearing a boy's breeches!"

Madouc said coldly: "If you found me in the tree without, you might have more cause for criticism."

Devonet gave a scornful sniff. "Now that you are on the ground, you should instantly go change. A pretty frock would be ever so much nicer."

"Not if I should decide to go out with Tyfer for an hour or two."

Devonet blinked. "Oh? Where would you go?"

"Most anywhere. Perhaps along the riverbank."

Chiodys asked with delicate emphasis: "Who is 'Tyfer'?"

Madouc gave her a wondering blue-eyed stare. "What odd things must go on in your mind! Tyfer is my horse. What else could he be?"

Chiodys giggled. "I was a bit confused."

Without comment, Madouc turned away.

Devonet called out: "Where are you going?"

"To the stables."

Devonet screwed up her pretty face. "I don't want to go to the stables. Let us do something else."

Chiodys suggested: "We can sit in the garden and play 'Tit tiewit' or 'Cockalorum'!"

"That sounds like fine sport!" said Madouc. "You two start the game. I will join you presently."

Chlodys said doubtfully: "It's no fun with just two!"

"Besides," said Devonet, "Lady Desdea wants us to attend you."

"It's so that you may learn proper manners," said Chiodys.

"That, in fact, is the way of it," said Devonet. "Without pedigree you can't be expected to come by such things naturally as we do."

"I have a fine pedigree somewhere," said Madouc bravely. "I am certain of it, and one day I will make a search-perhaps sooner than later."



Devonet gave a choked gurgle of laughter. "Do you go now to search the stables?"

Madouc turned her back and walked away. Devonet and Chlodys looked after her with vexation. Chlodys called: "Wait for us! We will come with you, but you must behave properly!"

Later in the day Devonet and Chlodys reported to Lady Desdea. Both were thoroughly annoyed with Madouc, who had acceded to none of their wishes. "She kept us there forever while she groomed her Tyfer horse and braided its mane!"

But worse was to come. Madouc finished with Tyfer and led him away, but failed to return. The two girls went to find her. As they picked their way fastidiously around the stable, an exit gate swung open without warning, thrusting them from the stone coping into the drainage sump, so that both stumbled and fell. At this point Madouc appeared in the opening and asked why they were playing in the manure. "This is not what I consider ladylike behavior," Madouc told them haughtily. "Have you no regard for decency?"

Lady Desdea could only deplore the misfortune. "You should be more careful. Still, Madouc need not lavish so

much time on that horse. Tomorrow I shall see to it! We shall sit to our needlework, with honeycakes and sangaree for us all to enjoy."

At twilight the three girls supped on cold fowl and onion pudding in a pleasant little room overlooking the park. Prince Cassander came to sit with them. At his order, the steward brought a flask of pale sweet wine. Cassander sat back in his chair, sipping from the goblet and talking largely of his theories and exploits. On the morrow he and his comrades intended to ride north to Flauhamet, a town on Old Street, where a great fair was in progress. "There will be jousting,"<sup>7</sup> said Cassander. "Perhaps I

will take up a gage or two, if the competition is fair; we do not wish to compete against yokels and ploughboys; that goes without saying."

Even at her relatively early age, Devonet was always ready to test her skills. "You must be very brave, to take such risks!"

Cassander made an expansive gesture. "It is a complicated skill, comprised of practice, horsemanship and natural ability. I flatter myself that I run a good course. You three should come to Flauhamet, at least to see the fair. Then, should we joust, we will wear your ribbons! What do you think of that?"

"It sounds splendid," said Chlodys. "But Lady Desdea has other plans for tomorrow."

"In the morning we will sit at our needlework in the conservatory, while Master Jocelyn sings to the lute." Devonet darted a glance toward Madouc. "In the afternoon the queen holds court and we will all attend her, as is proper."

"Ah well, you must do what Lady Desdea thinks best," said Cassander. "Perhaps there will be another occasion before summer is over."

"I do hope so!" said Devonet. "It would

be most exciting to watch you vanquish your opponents, one after the other!"

"It is not so easy as that," said Cassander. "And there may be only bumpkins on plough horses to ride against. Still, we shall see."

## II

In the morning, early, with the sun still red in the east, Madouc rose from her bed, dressed, took a hasty breakfast of porridge and figs in the kitchen, then ran around to the stables. Here she searched out Pymfyd and commanded him to saddle Tyfer, and his own horse as well.

Pymfyd blinked, yawned and scratched his head. "It is neither entertaining nor sensible to ride out so early."

"Do not attempt to think, Pymfyd! I have already made the decisions. Merely saddle the horses, and without delay."

"I see no need for haste," growled Pymfyd. "The day is young and the day is long."

"Is it not clear? I want to avoid Devonet and Chlodys! You have heard my orders; please be quick."

"Very good, Your Highness." Pymfyd languidly saddled the horses, and led

them from the stable. "Where do you intend to ride?"

"Here, there, up the lane, perhaps as far as Old Street."

"Old Street? That is a goodly distance: four miles, or is it five?"

"No matter; the day is fine and the horses are eager for their run."

"But we will not be back for our dinner! Must I go hungry on this account?"

"Come along, Pymfyd! Today your stomach is not important."

"Perhaps not to you of the royalty, who



nibble at will upon saffron cakes and tripes in honey! I am a vulgar lout with a gut to match, and now you must wait till I find bread and cheese for my dinner."

"Be quick!"

Pymfyd ran off and returned a few moments later carrying a cloth sack which he tied to the back of his saddle.

Madouc asked: "Are you ready at last? Then let us be off."

### III

The two rode up Sarris Way across the royal parkland: past meadows sparkling

with daisies, lupines, wild mustard, flaming red poppies, past copses of ash and birch; through the shade of massive oaks where they overhung the lane. They departed the royal domain through a stone portal and almost immediately encountered a crossroads, where Sarris Way became Fanship Lane.

Madouc and Pymfyd rode north up Fanship Lane, not without grumbling from Pymfyd, who could not understand Madouc's interest in Old Street. "There is nothing to see but the road, which runs to the right and also to the left."

"Just so," said Madouc. "Let us proceed."

The countryside presently became marked by evidence of cultivation: fields planted to oats and barley, marked off by old stone fences, an occasional farmhouse. After a mile or two, the lane ascended a long easy slope by slants and traverses, finally, at the top of the rise, intersecting with Old Street.

Madouc and Pymfyd pulled up their horses. Looking back across the panorama to the south, they could trace the entire length of Fanship Lane to the crossroads, and beyond, across the king's park to the poplars beside the River Glame, though Sarris itself was concealed behind trees.

As Pymfyd had asserted, Old Street continued in both directions, over the downs and out of sight. Fanship Lane, crossing Old Street, proceeded onward toward the somber loom of Forest Tantrevalles, at this point little more than a mile to the north.

At the moment Old Street was empty of traffic: a fact that seemed to excite Pymfyd's suspicions. Craning his neck, he stared first in one direction then the other. Madouc watched in puzzlement, and finally asked: "Why are you searching so carefully, when there is nothing to be seen?"

"That is what I want to see."

"I don't quite understand."

"Naturally not," said Pymfyd loftily.

"You are too young to know the woes of the world, which are many. There is also much wickedness, if one cares to look, or even if one takes care not to look."

Madouc inspected the road: first to the east, then to the west. "At the moment I see nothing either woeful or wicked."

"That is because the road is empty. Wickedness often springs into view from nowhere, which makes it so fearful."

"Pymfyd, I believe that you are obsessed by fear."

"It may well be, since fear rules the world. The hare fears the fox, who fears the hound, who fears the kennelmaster, who fears the lord, who fears the king whose fears I would not have the impudence to think upon."

"Poor Pymfyd! Your world is built of fear and dread! As for me, I have no time for such emotions."

Pymfyd spoke in an even voice. "You are a royal princess and I may not call you a witless little fool, even should the thought cross my mind."

Madouc turned him a sad blue-eyed glance. "So that, after all, is your

concept of me."

"I will say only this: persons who fear nothing are soon dead."

"I have a fear or two," said Madouc.

"Needlework, Master Jocelyn's dancing lessons, one or two other things which need not be mentioned."

"I have many fears," said Pymfyd proudly. "Mad dogs, lepers and leper bells, hellhorses, harpies, and witches; lightning-riders and the creatures who live at the bottom of wells; also: hop-legs, irchments and ghosts who wait by the lych gate."

"Is that all?" asked Madouc.

"By no means! I fear dropsy, milkeye and the pox. Now that I think of it, I very much fear the king's displeasure! We must turn back before someone sees us so far from Sarris and carries tales!"

"Not so fast!" said Madouc. "When it is time to return I will give the signal." She studied the signpost. "Flauhamet is only four miles distant."

Pymfyd cried out in quick alarm: "Four miles or four hundred - it makes no difference!"

"Prince Cassander mentioned the



Flauhamet fair, and said it was very gay."

"One fair is much like another," declared Pymfyd. "The favored resort of rogues, cheats and cut-purses!"

Madouc paid no heed. "There are to be jugglers, buffoons, songsters, stilt-dancers, mimes and mountebanks."

"These folk are by and large disreputable," growled Pymfyd. "That is common knowledge."

"There is also a tournament of jousting. Prince Cassander may take a turn in the lists, if the competition suits him."

"Hmf. That I doubt."

"Oh? How so?"

Pymfyd looked off across the landscape.

"It is not fitting that I discuss Prince Cassander."

"Speak! Your words will go no farther."

"I doubt if he will risk the lists with so many folk to watch should he take a tumble."

Madouc grinned. "For a fact, he is vain. In any event, I don't care to watch the jousting. I would rather wander among the booths."

Pymfyd's honest face took on a set of mulish obstinacy. "We cannot ride into town so free and easy, to rub elbows with the bumpkins! Can you imagine Her Majesty's disapproval? You would be chided and I would be beaten. We must turn back, since the day advances."

"It is still early! Devonet and Chiodys are only just settling to their needlework."

Pymfyd gave a cry of consternation. He pointed westward along Old Street.

"Folk are approaching; they are gentry and you will be recognized! We must be gone before they arrive."

Madouc heaved a sigh. Pymfyd's logic could not be refuted. Reining Tyfer about, she started back along Fanship Lane, only to stop short.

"What now?" demanded Pymfyd.

"A party is coming up Fanship Lane. That is Cassander on the bay horse, and it is no doubt King Casmir himself on the great black charger."

Pymfyd gave a groan of despair. "We are trapped!"

"Not so! We will cross Old Street and take cover up Fanship Lane until the way is clear."

"A sound idea, for once!" muttered Pymfyd. "Hurry! There is no time to waste; we can hide behind yonder trees!"

Touching up their horses, the two trotted across Old Street and north along the continuation of Fanship Lane, which quickly became little more than a track across the meadow. They approached a copse of poplar trees, where they hoped to take concealment.

Madouc called over her shoulder: "I smell smoke!"

Pymfyd called back: "There will be a crofter's hut nearby. You smell the

smoke from his hearth."

"I see no hut."

"That is not our great concern. Quick now, into the shade!" The two took themselves under the poplars, where they discovered the source of the smoke: a fire over which a pair of vagabonds roasted a rabbit. One was short and big-bellied, with a round flat face surrounded by an untidy fringe of black beard and black hair. The second was tall and thin as a stick, lank of arm and leg, with a face long and vacuous, like the face of a cod. Both wore ragged garments and tattered buskins. The tall vagabond wore a high piked cap of

black felt; his fat comrade wore a low-crowned hat with a very wide brim. To the side were a pair of sacks in which they evidently carried their belongings. At the sight of Madouc and Pymfyd, the two rose to their feet, and stood appraising the situation.

Madouc gave the two a cold inspection in return, and concluded that never had she encountered a more unsavory pair of rogues.

The short fat vagabond spoke: "And what are you two doing here, so fresh and airy?"

"That is none of your concern," said

Madouc. "Pymfyd, let us proceed; we disturb these persons at their meal."

"Not at all," said the short vagabond. He spoke to his tall comrade without taking his eyes from Madouc and Pymfyd.

"Ossip, have a look down the lane; see who else is near."

"All clear; no one in sight," reported Ossip.

"Those are fine horses," said the burly rogue. "The saddles and fitments are also of fine quality."

"Sammikin, notice! The red-haired brat wears a golden clasp."



"Is it not a farce, Ossip? That some wear gold, while others go without?"

"It is the injustice of life! Were I to wield power, everyone should share alike!"

"That is a noble concept indeed!"

Ossip peered at Tyfer's bridle. "See here! Even the horse wears gold!" He spoke with unctuous fervor: "Here is richness!"

Sammikin snapped his fingers. "I cannot help but rejoice! The sun shines bright and our luck has turned at last!"

"Still, we must exert ourselves in a certain way that we know of, in order to safeguard our reputations."

"Wise words, Ossip!" The two moved forward. Pymfyd called sharply to Madouc: "Ride off at speed!" He wheeled his own horse, but Ossip reached out a gangling arm and seized his bridle. Pymfyd kicked out vigorously and caught Ossip in the face, causing him to blink and clap his hand to his eye.

"Ah, you little viper; you have shown your teeth! Alas, my poor face! What pain!"

Sammikin had made a dancing little run toward Madouc, but she had kicked

Tyfer into motion, to ride a few yards up the lane, where she halted in an agony of indecision.

Sammikin turned back to where Ossip still hung to the bridle of Pymfyd's horse, despite Pymfyd's kicks and curses.

Sammikin, coming up behind, seized Pymfyd around the waist and flung him rudely to the ground. Pymfyd bellowed in outrage. Rolling to the side, he seized up a broken tree branch and, jumping to his feet, he stood at bay. "Dogs!" He brandished the limb with hysterical bravado. "Vermin! Come at me if you dare!" He looked over his shoulder to where Madouc sat rigid on Tyfer. "Ride away, you little fool, and be quick! Fetch

help!"

Sammikin and Ossip without haste took up their staffs and closed in on Pymfyd, who defended himself with might and main, until Sammikin's staff broke his branch into splinters. Sammikin fainted; Ossip raised his staff on high and struck Pymfyd across the side of the head, so that Pymfyd's eyes looked in opposite directions. He fell to the ground. Sammikin struck him again and again, while Ossip tied Pymfyd's horse to a tree. He started at a run toward Madouc. She finally roused herself from stupefaction, wheeled Tyfer, and set off up the lane at a gallop.

Pymfyd's head lolled to the side, with blood trickling from his mouth. Sammikin stood back with a grunt of approval. "This one will carry no tales! Now for the other."

Madouc, crouching low in the saddle, galloped up the lane, stone fences to either side. She looked over her shoulder; Ossip and Sammikin were trotting up the lane in pursuit. Madouc gave a low wild cry and kicked Tyfer to his best speed. She would ride up the lane until she found a gap in one of the fences, then dash away across the downs and back to Old Street.

Behind came the vagabonds, Ossip

pacing with long stately strides, Sammikin pumping his arms and scuttling like a fat rat. As before, they seemed in no great haste.

Madouc looked right and left. A ditch flowing with water ran beside the lane on one side with the stone fence beyond; to the other, the fence had given way to a hawthorn hedge. Ahead the lane curved to the side and passed through a gap in the fence. Without a pause Madouc galloped Tyfer through the gap. She stopped short in consternation, to find that she had entered a sheepfold of no great extent. She looked here and there and all around, but discovered no exit.

Up the lane came Ossip and Sammikin, puffing and blowing from their exertion. Ossip called out in a fluting voice: "Nicely, nicely now! Stand your horse; be calm and ready! Do not make us dodge about!"

'Quiet' is the word!" called Sammikin. "It will soon be over, and you will find it very quiet, so I am told."

"That is my understanding!" agreed Ossip. "Stand still and do not cry; I cannot abide a wailing child!"

Madouc looked desperately around the paddock, seeking a break or a low place over which Tyfer might jump, but in

vain. She slid to the ground, and hugged Tyfer's neck. "Goodbye, my dear good friend! I must leave you to save my life!" She ran to the fence, scrambled up and over and was gone from the fold.

Ossip and Sammikin called out in anger: "Stop! Come back! It is all in fun! We mean no harm!"

Madouc turned a frightened glance over her shoulder and only fled the faster, with the dark shade of the Forest Tantrevalles now close at hand.

Cursing, lamenting the need for so much exercise, and calling out the most awful threats that came to their minds,



Sammikin and Ossip scrambled over the fence and came in pursuit.

At the edge of the forest Madouc paused a moment to gasp and lean against the bole of a crooked old oak. Up the meadow, not fifty yards distant, came Ossip and Sammikin, both now barely able to run for fatigue. Sammikin took note of Madouc, where she stood by the tree, coppery curls in wild disarray. The two slowed almost to a halt, then advanced a sly step at a time. Sammikin called in a voice of syrup: "Ah, dear child, how clever you are to wait for us! Beware the forest, where the bogies live!"

Ossip added: "They will eat you alive and spit up your bones! You are safer with us!"

"Come, dear little chick!" called Sammikin. "We will play a jolly game together!"

Madouc turned and plunged into the forest. Sammikin and Ossip raised cries of wrathful disappointment. "Come back, you raddle-topped little itling!" "Now we are angry; you must be punished, and severely!" "Ah, vixen, but you will squeak and gasp and shudder! Our mercy? None! You had none for us!"

Madouc grimaced. Uneasy little spasms

tugged at her stomach. What a terrible place the world could be! They had killed poor Pymfyd, so good and so brave! And Tyfer! Never would she ride Tyfer again! And if they caught her, they would wring her neck on the spot-unless they thought to use her for some unthinkable amusement.

Madouc stopped to listen. She held her breath. The thud and crush of heavy feet on the dead leaves came frighteningly close at hand. Madouc darted off at an angle, around a thicket of blackthorn and another of bay, hoping to befuddle her pursuers.

The forest became dense; foliage

blocked away the sky, save only where a fallen tree, or an outcrop of rock, or some inexplicable circumstances, created a glade. A rotting log blocked Madouc's way; she clambered over, ducked around a blackberry bush, jumped a little rill where it trickled through watercress. She paused to look back and to catch her breath. Nothing fearful could be seen; undoubtedly she had evaded the two robbers. She held her breath to listen.

Thud-crunch, thud-crunch, thud-crunch: the sounds were faint and cautious but seemed to be growing louder, and, in fact, by chance, Ossip and Sammikin had glimpsed the flicker of Madouc's white

smock down one of the forest aisles, and were still on her trail.

Madouc gave a little cry of frustration. She turned and once more fled through the forest, picking out the most devious ways and the darkest shadows. She slid through a thicket of alders, waded a slow stream, crossed a glade and made a detour around a great fallen oak. Where the roots thrust into the air she found a dark little nook, concealed by a bank of foxglove. Madouc crouched down under the roots.

Several minutes passed. Madouc waited, hardly daring to breathe. She heard footsteps; Ossip and Sammikin went

blundering past. Madouc closed her eyes, fearing that they would feel the brush of her vision and stop short.

Ossip and Sammikin paused only an instant, to look angrily around the glade. Sammikin, hearing a sound in the distance, pointed his finger and gave a guttural cry; the two ran off into the depths of the forest. The thud of their footsteps diminished and was lost in the hush.

Madouc remained huddled in the cranny. She discovered that she was warm and comfortable; her eyelids drooped; despite her best intentions, she drowsed.

Time passed-how long? Five minutes? Half an hour? Madouc awoke, and now she felt cramped. Cautiously she began to extricate herself from the cranny. She stopped short. What was that sound, so thin and tinkling? Music? Madouc listened intently. The sounds seemed to come from a source not too far away, but hidden from her view by the foxglove foliage.

Madouc crouched indecisively, half in, half out of her covert. The music seemed artless and easy, even somewhat frivolous, with queer little trills and quavers. Such a music, thought Madouc, could not conceivably derive from threat or malice. She lifted her head and

peered through the foxglove. It would be an embarrassment to be discovered hiding in such an undignified condition. She plucked up her courage and rose to her feet, ordering her hair and brushing dead leaves from her garments, all the while looking around the glade.

Twenty feet distant, on a smooth stone, sat a pinch-faced little creature, not much larger than herself, with sound seagreen eyes, nut-brown skin and hair. He wore a suit of fine brown stuff striped blue and red; a jaunty little blue cap with a panache of blackbird's feathers, and long pointed shoes. In one hand he held a wooden sound-box from which protruded two dozen small metal



tongues; as he stroked the tongues music tinkled from the box.

The creature, taking note of Madouc, desisted from his play ing. He asked in a piping voice: "Why do you sleep when the day is so new? Time for sleep during owl's-wake."

Madouc replied in her best voice: "I slept because I fell asleep."

"I understand, at least better than I did before. Why do you stare at me? From marvelling admiration, as I would suppose?"

Madouc made a tactful response. "Partly

from admiration, and partly because I seldom talk with fairies."

The creature spoke with petulance. "I am a wefkin, not a fairy. The differences are obvious."

"Not to me. At least, not altogether."

"Wefkins are calm and stately by nature; we are solitary philosophers, as it were. Further, we are a gallant folk, proud and handsome, which conduces to fate-ridden amours both with mortals and with other halflings. We are truly magnificent beings."

"That much is clear," said Madouc.

"What of the fairies?" The wefkin made a gesture of deprecation. "An unstable folk, prone both to vagary and to thinking four thoughts at once. They are social creatures and require the company of their ilk; otherwise they languish. They chatter and titter; they preen and primp; they engage in grand passions which occupy them all of twenty minutes; extravagant excess is their watchword! Wefkins are paladins of valor; the fairies do deeds of wanton perversity. Has not your mother explained these distinctions to you?"

"My mother has explained nothing. She has long been dead."

'Dead'? What's this again?"

"She is dead as Dinan's cat, and I can't help but think it inconsiderate of her."

The wefkin blinked his green eyes and played a pensive trill on his melody box.

"This is grim news, and I am doubly surprised, since I spoke with her only a fortnight past, when she showed all her usual verve-of which, may I say, you have not been denied your full and fair share."

Madouc shook her head in perplexity.

"You must mistake me for someone else."

The wefkin peered closely at her. "Are you not Madouc, the beautiful and talented child now accepted, if somewhat gracelessly, as 'royal Princess of Lyonesse' by King Bumblehead?"

"I am she," said Madouc modestly. "But my mother was the Princess Suldrun."

"Not so! That is a canard! Your true mother is the fairy Twisk, of Thripsey Shee."

Madouc stared at the wefkin in open-mouthed wonder. "How do you know this?"

"it is common knowledge among the

halflings. Believe or disbelieve, as you wish."

"I do not question your words," said Madouc hastily. "But the news comes as an astonishment. How did it happen so?"

The wefkin sat upright on the stone. Rubbing his chin with long green fingers, he appraised Madouc sidelong. "Yes! I will recite the facts of the case, but only if you request the favor-since I would not care to startle you without your express permission." The wefkin fixed his great green eyes upon Madouc's face. "Is it your wish that I do you this favor?"

"Yes, please!"

"Just so! The Princess Suldrun gave birth to a boy-child. The father was Aillas of Troicinet. The baby is now known as Prince Dhrun."

"Prince Dhrun! Now I am truly astonished! How can it be? He is far older than I!"

"Patience! You shall learn all. Now then. For safety the baby was taken to a place in the forest. Twisk chanced to pass by and exchanged you for the little blond boy-baby, and that is the way of it. You are a changeling. Dhrun lived at Thripsey Shee a year and a day by mortal time, but by fairy time, many years elapsed: seven, eight, or it might

be nine; no one knows since no one keeps a reckoning."

Madouc stood in bemused silence. Then she asked: "Am I then of fairy blood?"

"You have lived long years in human places, eating human bread and drinking human wine. Fairy stuff is delicate; who knows how much has been replaced with human dross? That is the way of it; still, all taken with all, it is not so bad a condition. Would you have it differently?"

Madouc reflected. "I would not want to change from the way I am-whatever that is. But in any case, I am grateful to you



for the information."

"Save your thanks, my dear! It is just a little favor-barely enough to be reckoned."

"In that case, tell me who might be my father."

The wefkin chuckled. "You phrase the question with a nicety! Your father might be this one or he might be that one, or he might be someone far away and gone. You must ask Twisk, your mother. Would you like to meet her?"

"Very much indeed."

"I have a moment or two to spare. If you so request, I will teach you to call your mother."

"Please do!"

"Then you so request?"

"Of course!"

"I accede to your request with pleasure, and there will be no great increment to our little account. Step over here, if you will."

Madouc sidled from behind the bank of foxglove and approached the wefkin, who exuded a resinous odor, as if from

crushed herbs and pine needles, mingled with bosk, pollen and musk.

"Observe!" said the wefkin in a grand voice. "I pluck a blade of saw grass; I cut a little slit here and another here; then I do thus, then so. Now I blow a gentle breath-very easy, very soft, and the virtue of the grass produces a call. Listen!"

He blew, and the grass whistle emitted a soft tone. "Now then: you must make just such a whistle with your own fingers."

Madouc started to make the whistle, then, troubled by a thought which had been working at the back of her mind,

paused. She asked: "What do you mean when you speak of 'our little account'?"

The wefkin made a flickering flourish of long-fingered hands. "Nothing of large significance: in the main, just a way of speaking."

Madouc dubiously continued her work. She paused again. "It is well known that fairies never give without taking. Is the same true of wefkings?"

"Bah! In large transactions, this might be the case. Wefkins are not an avaricious folk."

Madouc thought to detect evasiveness.

"Tell me, then, how I must pay for your advice?"

The wefkin pulled at the flaps of his cap and tittered as if in embarrassment. "I will accept nothing of consequence. Neither silver nor gold, nor yet precious stuffs. I am happy to oblige someone so quick and pretty. If only for the joys of gratitude you may kiss the end of my nose, and that will settle our account. Is it agreed?"

Madouc looked askance at the wefkin and his long pointed nose, while the wefkin made foolish and inconsequential little gestures. Madouc said: "I will take the matter under advisement. I seldom

kiss strangers; on their noses or elsewhere."

The wefkin scowled and jerked his knees up under his chin. After a moment he resumed his bland demeanour. "You are unlike your mother in this regard. Well, no matter. I only thought to-but again, no matter. Have you made your grass flute? Well done. Blow softly, with kind expression-ah! That is good. Stop now, and listen to my instruction. To summon your mother you must blow into the flute and sing in this wise:

*'Lirra lissa larra lass*

*Madouc has made a flute of grass.*

*Softly blowing, wild and free*

*She calls to Twisk at Thripsey  
Shee.*

*Lirra lissa larra leer*

*A daughter calls her mother dear!*

*Tread the wind and vault the  
mere;*

*Span the sky and meet me here.*

*So sing I, Madouc.'*

Madouc, after a diffident rehearsal, took a deep breath to settle her nerves, then blew a soft note on the grass flute and

spoke the cantrap.

Nothing seemed to occur. Madouc looked here and there, then spoke to the wefkin. "Did I pronounce the charm correctly?"

A soft voice responded from behind the foxglove foliage: "You spoke the charm in good rendition." Twisk the fairy damsel came forward: a supple creature with a casual fluff of pale blue hair bound with a rope of sapphires.

Madouc called out in awe and rapture: "Are you truly my mother?"

"First things first," said Twisk. "How



did you agree to pay Zocco for his services?"

"He wanted me to kiss his nose. I told him that I would take advice on the matter."

"Quite right!" declared Zocco the wefkin. "In due course I will vouchsafe the correct advice, and that will be the end of it. We need discuss the subject no further."

"Since I am her mother, I will provide the advice, and spare you the effort," said Twisk.

"No effort for me! I am deft and alert in

my thinking!"

Twisk paid no heed. "Madouc, this is my advice: pick up yonder clod of dirt, and tender it to that popeyed little imp, speaking these words: 'Zocco, with this token I both imburse and reimburse you, in full fee and total account, now and then, anon and forever, in this world and all others, and in every other conceivable respect, for each and every service you have performed for me or in my behalf, real or imaginary, to the limits of time, in all directions.'"

"Sheer rigmarole and tommyrot!" scoffed Zocco. "Madouc, pay no heed to this foolish blue-haired wiffet; you and I

have our own arrangements, as you know."

Twisk came slowly forward, and Madouc was able to see her clearly: a lovely creature with skin the color of cream, features of surpassing delicacy. Her eyes, like those of Madouc, were wonderful dreaming sky-blue pools, in which a susceptible man might easily lose his wits. Twisk spoke to Madouc: "I will remark, as a matter of casual interest, that Zocco is notorious for his lewd conduct. If you kissed his nose you would be compelled into his service, and soon would be kissing him elsewhere, at his orders, and who knows what else?"

"This is unthinkable!" declared Madouc aghast. "Zocco seemed so affable and courteous!"

"That is the usual trick."

Madouc turned to Zocco. "I have now taken advisement." She picked up the clod of dirt. "Instead of kissing your nose, I tender you this token of my gratitude." She spoke the disclaimer which Twisk had contrived for her use, despite Zocco's squeaks and groans of protest.

With a pettish motion Zocco cast the clod of dirt aside. "Such tokens are useless! I cannot eat them; they are

flavorless! I cannot wear them; they lack style, and they provide no amusement whatever!"

Twisk said: "Silence, Zocco; your complaints are crass."

"In addition to the token," said Madouc with dignity, "and despite your horrifying plans, I extend you my thanks, in that you have united me with my mother, and no doubt Twisk feels the same gratitude."

"What!" said Twisk. "I had long put your existence out of my mind. Why, may I ask, did you call me?"

Madouc's jaw dropped. "I wanted to know my mother! I thought all the time she was dead."

Twisk gave an indulgent laugh. "The error is absurd. I am surcharged with vivacity, of all kinds!"

"So I see! I regret the mistake, but I was given false information."

"Just so. You must learn to be more skeptical. But now you know the truth and I will be returning to Thripsey Shee!"

"Not yet!" cried Madouc. "I am your beloved daughter, and you have only just

met me! Also, I need your help!"

Twisk sighed. "Is it not always the way? What then do you want of me?"

"I am lost in the forest! Two murderers killed Pymfyd and stole my horse Tyfer. They chased me and caused me a great fright; they wanted to kill me as well; also they called me a 'scrawny red-headed whelp'!"

Twisk stared in shock and disapproval. "You meekly stood by and allowed these insults?"

"By no means! I ran away as fast as possible and hid."

"You should have brought them a waft of hornets! Or shortened their legs so that their feet adjoined their buttocks! Or transformed them into hedgehogs!"

Madouc gave an embarrassed laugh. "I don't know how to do these things."

Twisk sighed once more. "I have neglected your education; I cannot deny it. Well, no time like the present, and we shall make a start at this instant." She took Madouc's hands in her own. "What do you feel?"

"A quiver came over me-a sensation most strange!" wisk nodded and stood back. "Now then: hold your thumb and



finger thus. Whisper 'Fwip' and jerk your chin toward what ever nuisance you wish to abate. You may practice on Zocco."

Madouc pressed thumb and finger together. "Like this?"

"Just so."

"And: 'Fwip'?"

"Correct."

"And jerk my chin-like this?"

Zocco uttered a screech and jumped four feet from the ground, twirling his feet rapidly in mid-air. "Hai hai kiyah!"

called Zocco. "Put me down!"

"You have worked the spell correctly," said Twisk. "See how he twirls his feet, as if dancing? The spell is known as the 'Tinkle-toe Imp-spring'."

Madouc allowed thumb and finger to separate and Zocco returned to the ground, seagreen eyes bulging from his head. "Hold hard on that mischief, and at once!"

Madouc spoke contritely. "Excuse me, Zocco! I think that I jerked my chin a bit too hard."

"That was my own thought," said Twisk.

"Try again, using less force."

On this occasion Zocco jumped less than three feet into the air, and his outcries were considerably less shrill.

"Well done!" said Twisk. "You have a natural bent for such work!"

"It has come too late," gloomed Madouc. "Poor Pymfyd lies dead in the ditch, and all through my insistence upon the Flauhamet fair!"

Twisk made an airy gesture. "Did you strike Pymfyd dead?"

"No, Mother."

"Then you need feel no remorse."

Madouc's distress was not fully relieved. "All very well, but Ossip and Sammikin who struck the blows feel no remorse either! They beat poor Pymfyd till the blood gushed; then they chased me and stole Tyfer. I have met you and I am overjoyed for this reason, but at the same time I grieve for Pymfyd and Tyfer."

Zocco chuckled. "Just like a female, singing both bass and falsetto with the same breath!"

Twisk turned Zocco a glance of mild inquiry. "Zocco, did you speak?"

Zocco licked his lips. "An idle thought, no more."

"Since you lack occupation, perhaps you will look into the vexations which Madouc has described."

Zocco said peevishly: "I see no reason to oblige either you or your unappealing brat of a daughter."

"The choice is yours," said Twisk graciously. She spoke to to Madouc: "Wefkins are unimaginative. Zocco, for instance, envisions a future of blissful ease, with never a pang of discomfort.

Right or wrong?"

"He is wrong indeed."

Zocco jumped to his feet. "I find that I have a few moments to spare. It will do no harm to take a cursory look around the landscape, and perhaps make an adjustment or two."

Twisk nodded. "Please report your findings on the instant!" Zocco was gone. Twisk examined Madouc from head to toe. "This is an interesting occasion. As I mentioned, I had almost forgotten your existence."

Madouc spoke stiffly: "It was not very nice of you to give me away, your own darling little child, and take another in

my place."

"Yes and no," said Twisk. "You were not as darling as you might like to think; indeed, you were something of a rippet. Dhrun was golden-haired and sweet-natured; he gurgled and laughed, while you screamed and kicked. It was a relief to be rid of you."

Madouc held her tongue; reproaches, clearly, would serve no useful purpose. She spoke with dignity: "I hope that I have given you reason to change your opinion."

"You might have turned out worse. I seem to have gifted you with a certain

queer intelligence, and perhaps an inkling of my own extravagant beauty, though your hair is a frowst."

"That is because I have been running through the woods in terror and hiding under a rotten log. If you like, you may give me a magic comb, which will order my hair at a touch."

"A good idea," said Twisk. "You will find it under your pillow when you return to Sarris."

Madouc's mouth dropped. "Am I to return to Sarris?"

"Where else?" asked Twisk, somewhat



tartly.

"We could live together in a pretty little castle of our own, perhaps beside the sea."

"That would not be practical. You are quite suitably housed at Sarris. But remember: no one must learn of our meeting - King Casmir, in particular!"

"Why so? Though I had no intention of telling him."

"It is a complicated story. He knows that you are a changeling, but, try as he might, he has never been able to identify Suldrun's true child. Were he to know-

and he would force the truth from you-he would send out assassins, and Dhrun would soon be dead."

Madouc grimaced. "Why should he do such a terrible deed?"

"Because of a prediction in regard to Suldrun's first-born son, which causes him anxiety. Only the priest Umphred knows the secret and he hugs it close, at least for the moment. Now then, Madouc, while this has been an interesting occasion-"

"Not yet! There is still much to talk about! Will we meet again soon?"

Twisk gave an indifferent shrug. "I live in a constant flux; I am unable to make fixed plans."

"I am not sure whether I live in a flux or not," said Madouc. "I know only that Devonet and Chiodys call me 'bastard' and insist that I lack all pedigree."

"In a formal sense, they are correct, if somewhat rude."

Madouc spoke wistfully: "I suspected as much. Still, I would like to know the name of my father and all the particulars of his personality and condition."

Twisk laughed. "You pose a conundrum

I cannot even begin to solve."

Madouc spoke in shock: "You cannot remember his name?"

"No.

"Nor his rank? Nor his race? Nor his appearance?"

"The episode occurred long ago. I cannot recall every trifling incident of my life."

"Still, since he was my father, he was surely a gentleman of rank, with a very long and fine pedigree."

"I remember no such individual."

"It seems, then, that I cannot even claim to be a bastard of high degree!"

Twisk had become bored with the subject. "Make whatever claim you like; no one can disprove you, not even I! In any case, bastard or not, you are still reckoned to be Princess Madouc of Lyonesse! This is an enviable estate!"

From the corner of her eye Madouc glimpsed a flicker of green and blue. "Zocco has returned."

Zocco reported his findings. "Neither corpse nor cadaver made itself known, and I adjudged the issue to be moot.

Proceeding eastward along Old Street, I discovered two rogues on horseback. Fat Sammikin sat high on a tall bay like the hump on a camel. Ossip Longshanks bestrode a dappled pony, with his feet dragging the ground."

"Alas, poor Tyfer!" mourned Madouc.

Twisk asked: "And how did you resolve the case?"

"The horses are tethered in the paddock. The rogues are running across Lanklyn Down pursued by bears."

"Sammikin perhaps should have been transformed into a toad and Ossip into a

salamander," said Twisk. "I would also have verified Pymfyd's death more carefully, if only that I might observe the prodigy of a walking corpse."

Madouc suggested: "Perhaps he is not dead?"

"That, of course, is possible," said Twisk.

Zocco grumbled: "If he wanted to be thought dead, he should have remained in place."

"Quite so," said Twisk. "Now you may go your way. In the future try no more sly tricks upon my innocent young daughter."

Zocco grumbled: "She is young, but I doubt if she is all so innocent. Still, I will now bid you farewell." Zocco seemed to fall backward off the stone and was gone.

"Zocco is not a bad sort, as wefkins go," said Twisk. "Now then, time presses. It has been a pleasure to meet you after so many years, but-"

"Wait!" cried Madouc. "I still know nothing of my father, nor my pedigree!"

"I will give the matter thought. In the meantime-"

"Not yet, Mother dear! I need your help



in a few other small ways!"

"If I must, I must," said Twisk. "What are your needs?"

"Pymfyd may be in bad case, sore and ill. Give me something to make him well."

"That is simple enough." Twisk plucked a laurel leaf, spat delicately into its center. She folded the leaf into a wad, touched it to her forehead, nose and chin, and gave it to Madouc. "Rub this upon Pymfyd's wounds, for his quick good health. Is there anything else? If not-"

"There is something else! Should I use

the Tinkle-toe upon Lady Desdea? She might jump so high as to cause an embarrassment, or even to injure herself!"

"You have a kind heart," said Twisk. "As for the Tinkle-toe, you must learn to gauge both the finesse of your gesture and the thrust of your chin. With practice, you will control the vigor of her jump to exactly a proper altitude. What else?"

Madouc considered. "I would like a wand to do transformations, a cap of invisibility, swift slippers to walk the air, a purse of boundless wealth, a talisman to compel the love of all, a

mirror-"

"Stop!" cried Twisk. "Your needs are excessive!"

"It does no harm to ask," said Madouc.  
"When will I see you again?"

"If necessary, come to Thripsey Shee."

"How will I find this place?"

"Fare along Old Street to Little Saffield. Turn north up Timble Way, pass first through Tawn Timble, then Glymwode, which is hard by the forest. Take directions to Wamble Path, which leads into Thripsey Meadow. Arrive at noon,

but never at night, for a variety of reasons. Stand at the edge of the meadow and softly speak my name three times, and I will come. If nuisances are committed upon you, cry out: 'Trouble me not, by fairy law!'"

Madouc made a hopeful suggestion: "It might be more convenient if I called you with the grass flute."

"More convenient for you perhaps; not necessarily for me." Twisk stepped forward and kissed Madouc's forehead. She stood back smiling. "I have been remiss, but that is my nature, and you must expect nothing better from me."

Twisk was gone. Madouc, her forehead tingling, stood alone in the glade. She looked at the place where Twisk had stood, then turned away and also departed.

## IV

Madouc returned through the forest the way she had come. In the sheepfold she found Tyfer and Pymfyd's bay tethered to a post. She mounted Tyfer and rode down the lane toward Old Street, leading the bay. As she rode, she searched carefully to either side of the way, but Pymfyd was nowhere to be seen, neither alive nor dead. The

circumstances caused Madouc both anxiety and puzzlement. If Pymfyd were alive, why had he lain so limp and still in the ditch? If Pymfyd were dead, why should he walk away?

Madouc, with wary glances to right and left, crossed Old Street into Fanship Way. She continued south, and presently arrived at Sarris. In a mournful mood she took the horses around to the stables, and at last the mystery in regard to Pymfyd's disappearance was clarified. Sitting disconsolately beside the dungheap was Pymfyd himself.

At the sight of Madouc, Pymfyd jumped to his feet. "At last you trouble to show

yourself!" he cried out. "Why have you dallied so long?"

Madouc responded with dignity: "I was delayed by events beyond my control."

"All very well!" growled Pymfyd.

"Meanwhile I have been sitting here on tenterhooks! If King Casmir had come before your return, I would now be crouching deep in a dungeon."

"Your worries seem far less for me than for yourself," said Madouc with a sniff.

"Not so! I made several guesses as to your probable fate, and was not cheered. Exactly what happened to you?"

Madouc saw no need to report the full scope of her adventures. "The robbers chased me deep into the forest. After I eluded them I circled back to Old Street and rode home. That, in general, is what happened." She dismounted from Tyfer, and examined Pymfyd from head to toe. "You seem in adequately good health. I feared that you were dead, from the effect of so many cruel blows."

"Hah!" said Pymfyd scornfully. "I am not so easily daunted! My head is thick."

"On the whole, and taking all with all, your conduct cannot be faulted," said Madouc. "You fought your best."



"True! Still, I am not a fool! When I saw how events were going I feigned death."

"Have you bruises? Do you hurt?"

"I cannot deny a few aches and as many pains. My head throbs like a great bell!"

"Approach me, Pymfyd! I will try to allay your suffering."

Pymfyd asked suspiciously: "What do you plan to do?"

"You need ask no questions."

"I tend to be cautious in the matter of cures. I want neither cathartics nor

clysters."

Madouc paid no heed to the remark. "Come here and show me where you hurt."

Pymfyd approached and gingerly indicated his bruises. Madouc applied the poultice she had received from Twisk, and Pymfyd's pain instantly disappeared.

"That was well done," said Pymfyd grudgingly. "Where did you learn such a trick?"

"It is a natural art," said Madouc. "I also wish to commend your bravery. You

fought hard and well, and deserve recognition." She looked here and there, but discovered no implement suitable to her needs save the manure fork.

"Pymfyd, kneel before me!"

Once again Pymfyd stared in perplexity.  
"Now what?"

"Do as I say! It is my royal command!"

Pymfyd gave a fatalistic shrug. "I suppose I must humor you, though I see no reason for such humility."

"Cease grumbling, as well!"

"Then be quick with whatever game you

are playing! Already I feel a fool."

Madouc took up the manure fork and raised it on high. Pymfyd dodged and threw his arm over his head. "What are you up to?"

"Patience, Pymfyd! This tool symbolizes a sword of fine steel!" Madouc touched the fork to Pymfyd's head. "For notable valor on the field of combat, I dub you Sir Pom-Pom, and by this title shall you be known henceforth. Arise, Sir Pom-Pom! In my eyes, at least, you have proved your mettle!"

Pymfyd rose to his feet, grinning and scowling at the same time. "The

stablemen will not care a fig one way or the other."

"No matter! In my opinion you are now 'Sir Pom-Pom'."

The newly knighted Sir Pom-Pom shrugged. "It is at least a start."

# CHAPTER FOUR

## I

Lady Desdea, upon receiving word from the stable of Madouc's return to Sarris, posted herself in the entry hail, where she could be sure to intercept the miscreant princess.

Five minutes passed. Lady Desdea waited with eyes glittering and arms crossed, fingers tap-tapping against her elbow. Madouc, listless and weary, pushed open the door and entered the hall. She crossed to the side passage, looking neither right nor left as if

absorbed in her private thoughts, ignoring Lady Desdea as if she were not there.

Smiling a small grim smile, Lady Desdea called out: "Princess Madouc! If you please, I would like a word with you!"

Madouc stopped short, shoulders sagging. Reluctantly she turned. "Yes, Lady Desdea? What do you wish?"

Lady Desdea spoke with restraint. "First, I wish to comment upon your conduct, which has caused us all a distraction. Next, I wish to inform you of certain plans which have been made."

"If you are tired," said Madouc in a voice of forlorn hope, "you need not trouble with the comment. As for the plans, we can discuss them another time."

Lady Desdea's small smile seemed frozen on her face. "As you wish, though the comment is most pertinent and the plans concern you both directly and indirectly."

Madouc started to turn away. "One moment," said Lady Desdea. "I will mention only this: Their Majesties will celebrate Prince Cassander's birthday with a grand fête. Many important persons will be on hand. There will be a



formal reception, at which you will sit with the rest of the royal family."

"Ah well, I suppose it is no great matter," said Madouc, and again started to turn away, and again Lady Desdea's voice gave her pause. "In the interim you must school yourself in the customary social graces, that you may appear at your best advantage."

Madouc spoke over her shoulder: "There is little for me to learn, since all I need do is sit quietly and nod my head from time to time."

"Ha, there is more to it than that," said Lady Desdea. "You will learn the details

tomorrow."

Madouc pretended not to hear and went off down the passage to her chambers. She went directly to her bed and looked down at the pillow. What would she find beneath? Slowly, and fearful that she would find nothing, she lifted the pillow, and saw a small silver comb.

Madouc gave a quiet little cry of joy. Twisk was not a totally adequate mother, but at least she was alive and not dead, like the Princess Suldrun; and Madouc was not alone in the world, after all.

On the wall beside her dressing table

was a mirror of Byzantine glass, rejected by Queen Sollace for reason of flaws and distortions, but which had been considered good enough for the use of Princess Madouc, who, in any case, seldom used the mirror.

Madouc went to stand before the mirror. She looked at her reflection, and blue eyes looked back at her, under a careless tumble of copper-gold curls. "My hair is not such a frightful vision as they like to make out," Madouc told herself bravely. "It is perhaps not constrained in an even bundle, but I would not have it so. Let us see what happens."

Madouc pulled the comb through her

hair. It slid easily through the strands, with none of the usual jerks and snags; the comb was a pleasure to use. Madouc stopped to appraise her reflection. The change, while not startling, was definite. The curls seemed to fall into locks, and arranged themselves of their own accord around her face. "No doubt it is an improvement," Madouc told herself. "Especially if it helps me escape ridicule and criticism. Today has been most eventful!"

In the morning Madouc took her breakfast of porridge and boiled bacon in a sunny little alcove to the side of the kitchen, where she knew she would not be likely to encounter either Devonet or

Chlodys. Madouc decided to consume a peach, then loitered over a bunch of grapes. She was not surprised when Lady Desdea looked through the door. "So this is where you are hiding."

"I am not hiding," said Madouc coldly. "I am taking my breakfast."

"I see. Are you finished?"

"Not quite. I am still eating grapes."

"When you have finally eaten your fill, please come to the morning room. I will await you there."

Madouc resignedly rose to her feet. "I

will come now."

In the morning room, Lady Desdea pointed to a chair. "You may sit."

Madouc, disliking Lady Desdea's tone, turned her a sulky glance, then slumped upon the chair, legs spraddled forward, chin on her chest.

Lady Desdea, after a glance of disapproval, said: "Her Highness the queen feels that your deportment is unsatisfactory. I am in accord."

Madouc twisted her mouth into a crooked line, but said nothing.

Lady Desdea went on. "The situation is neither casual nor trivial. Of all your adjuncts and possessions the most precious is your reputation. Ah!" Lady Desdea thrust her face forward. "You puff out your cheeks; you are in doubt. However, I am correct!"

"Yes, Lady Desdea."

"As a princess of Lyonesse, you are a person of importance! Your renown, for good or bad, travels far and fast, as if on the wings of a bird! For this reason you must be at all times gentle, gracious and nice; you must nurture your reputation, as if it were a beautiful garden of fragrant flowers!"

Madouc said thoughtfully: "You can help by giving good reports of me in all quarters."

"First you must alter your habits, since I do not care to look ridiculous."

"In that case I suppose you had better remain silent."

Lady Desdea paced two steps in one direction, then two steps in the other. Halting, she faced Madouc once more. "Do you wish to be known as a lovely young princess notable for her decorum, or an unprincipled little hussy, all dirty face and knobby knees?"



Madouc reflected. "Are there no other choices?"

"These will suffice at the moment."

Madouc heaved a deep sigh. "I don't mind being thought a lovely young princess so long as I am not expected to act like one."

Lady Desdea smiled her grim smile. "Unfortunately that is impossible. You will never be thought something you are not. Since it is essential that, during the fête, you present yourself as a gracious and virtuous young princess, you must act like one. Since you seem to be ignorant of that skill, you must learn it.

By the wishes of the queen, you will not be allowed to ride your horse, or otherwise wander the countryside, or swim the river, until after the fête."

Madouc looked up with a stricken expression. "What will I do with myself?"

"You will learn the conventions of the court and good deportment, and your lessons begin at this instant. Extricate your self from that ungainly slouch and sit erect in the chair, hands folded in your lap."

## II

The occasion of Prince Cassander's eighteenth birthday would be celebrated at a festival which King Casmir intended should surpass any that had yet enlivened the summer palace at Sarris. For days wagons had been arriving from all directions, loaded with sacks, crocks and crates, tubs of pickled fish; racks dangling with sausages, hams and bacon; barrels of oil, wine, cider and ale; baskets laden with onions, turnips, cabbages, leeks; also parcels of ramp, parsley, sweet herbs and cress. Day and night the kitchens were active, with the stoves never allowed to go cold. In the service-yard four ovens, constructed for the occasion, produced crusty loaves,

saffron buns, fruit tarts; also sweet-cakes flavored with currants, anise, honey and nuts, or even cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. One of the ovens produced only pies and pasties, stuffed with beef and leeks, or spiced hare seethed in wine, or pork and onions, or pike with fennel, or carp in a swelter of dill, butter and mushrooms, or mutton with barley and thyme.

On the night previous to Cassander's birthday, a pair of oxen were set to roast over the fire on heavy iron spits, along with two boars and four sheep. In the morning two hundred fowl would join the display, that they might be ready for the great banquet which would begin at

noon and continue until the hunger of the company had been totally satiated.

As early as two days before the celebration, notables began to arrive at Sarris, coming from all quarters of Lyonesse; from Blaloc, Pomperol and Dahaut; from as far afield as Aquitaine, Armorica, Ireland and Wales. The most exalted of the lords and ladies were quartered either in the east wing or the west wing of Sarris proper; late-corners and folk of lesser estate used equally pleasant pavilions on the lawn beside the river. Miscellaneous dignitaries-the barons, knights, marshals, along with their ladies-were required to make shift with pallets and couches in certain of the

halls and galleries of Sarris. Most of the notables would depart on the day following the banquet, though a few might linger in order to confer with King Casmir upon matters of high policy. Immediately before the banquet, the royal family planned to sit at a reception, that they might formally greet their guests. The reception would begin at mid-morning and proceed until noon. Madouc had been duly notified that her presence at the function would be required, and she had further been advised that only her best and most maidenly conduct would suit the occasion.

Late in the evening of the day before the

event, Lady Desdea took herself to Madouc's bedchamber, where she made explicit to Madouc the conduct which would be expected of her. In response to Madouc's disinterested comment she became testy. "We will not on this occasion niggle over paltry details! Each is significant; and if you will trouble to recall your Euclid, you will remember that the whole is the sum of its parts!"

"Whatever you say. Now I am tired and I will go to my bed."

"Not yet! It is necessary that you understand the reasons for our concern. There have been rumours far and wide of your unruly behavior and wildness.

Each of the guests will be watching you with an almost morbid fascination, waiting for some peculiar or even freakish demonstration."

"Bah," muttered Madouc. "They can ogle as they like; it is all the same to me. Are you now done?"

"Not yet!" snapped Lady Desdea. "I am still far from reassured by your attitude. Further, the guests will include a number of young princes. Many of these will be anxious to make suitable marriages."

Madouc yawned. "I care not a whit. Their intrigues are no concern of mine."



"You had better be concerned, and intimately so! Any of these princes would happily connect with the royal house of Lyonesse! They will be studying you with keen interest, appraising your possibilities."

"That is vulgar conduct," said Madouc.

"Not altogether; in fact, it is natural and right. They wish to make a good match for themselves! At the moment, you are too young for any thought of marriage, but the years are swift, and when the time comes to discuss betrothal, we want the princes to remember you with approval. This will enable King Casmir to make the best possible arrangement."

"Foolishness and absurdity, both up and down!" said Madouc crossly. "If King Casmir likes marriage so much, let him marry off Devonet and Chlodys, or Prince Cassander, or you, for that matter. But he must not expect me to take any part in the ceremonies."

Lady Desdea cried out in shock: "Your talk is a scandal!" She groped for words. "I will say no more; you may retire now. I only hope that you are more reasonable in the morning."

Madouc deigned no reply, and marched silently off to her bed.

In the morning maids and under-maids

arrived in force. Warm water was poured into a great wooden tub; Madouc was lathered with white Egyptian soap, rinsed clean in water scented with balm from Old Tingis. Her hair was brushed till it shone, after which she unobtrusively combed it with her own comb, so that the copper-golden curls arranged themselves to best advantage. She was dressed in a confection of blue lawn ruffled at shoulder and sleeve, pleated with white in the skirt.

Lady Desdea watched critically from the side. Life at Sarris, so she reflected, seemed to agree with Madouc; at times the scamp looked almost pretty, although her contours and long legs were

deplorably boyish.

Madouc was not happy with the gown. "There are too many pleats and twickets."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Desdea. "The gown makes the most of what little figure you have; you should be grateful. It is quite becoming."

Madouc ignored the remarks, which pleased her not at all. She sat glowering as her hair was brushed once again 'for the sake of a job well done', as Lady Desdea put it, then confined by a silver fillet set with cabochons of lapis lazuli.

Lady Desdea gave Madouc her final instructions. "You will be meeting a number of notables! Remember: you must engage them with your charm, and make sure of their extreme good opinion, in order that all the sour and stealthy rumours once and for all are given the lie and nailed to the wall!"

"I cannot achieve the impossible," growled Madouc. "If persons intend to think ill of me, they will do so, even though I grovel at their feet and implore their respectful admiration."

"Such extreme conduct will surely not be necessary," said Lady Desdea tartly. "Amiability and courtesy are usually

sufficient."

"You are fitting horseshoes on a cow! Since I am the princess, it is they who must supplicate my good opinion; not I theirs. That is simple and reasonable."

Lady Desdea refused to pursue the subject. "No matter! Listen as the notables are introduced and greet them nicely, by title and by name. They will thereby think you gracious and kind, and instantly begin to doubt the rumours."

Madouc made no response, and Lady Desdea continued with her instructions: "Sit quietly; neither fidget nor scratch, neither wriggle nor writhe. Keep your

knees together; do not sprawl, spraddle, slump nor kick out your feet. Your elbows must be held close, unlike the wings of a seagull as it veers on the wind. If you see an acquaintance across the room, do not set up a boisterous outcry; that is not proper conduct. Do not wipe your nose on the back of your hand. Do not grimace, blow out your cheeks; do not giggle, with or without reason. Can you remember all this?"

Lady Desdea awaited a response, but Madouc sat staring blankly across the room. Lady Desdea peered close, then called out sharply: "Well then, Princess Madouc? Will you give me an answer?"

"Certainly, whenever you wish! Say what you wish to say!"

"I have already spoken at length."

"Evidently my thoughts were elsewhere, and I did not hear you."

Lady Desdea's hands twitched. She said in a metallic voice: Come. The reception will be underway in short order. For once in your life you must evince the conduct to be expected of a royal princess, so that you will make a good impression."

Madouc said in an even voice: "I am not anxious to make a good impression.



Someone might want to marry me."

Lady Desdea confined her response to a sarcastic sniff. "Come; we are expected."

Lady Desdea let the way: down the passage to the main gallery and the Great Hall, with Madouc lagging behind, using a loping bent-kneed gait which Lady Desdea ascribed to sheer perversity and ignored. Folk had already gathered in the Great Hall, where they stood in groups, greeting acquaintances, appraising new arrivals, bowing stiffly to adversaries, ignoring their enemies. Each wore his most splendid garments, hoping to command, at minimum, attention or,

better, admiration or, at best, envy. As the notables moved from place to place, silks and satins swirled and caught the glow of light; the room swam with color, so vivid and rich that each hue displayed a vitality of its own: lavender, purple, dead black; intense saturated yellow and mustard-ocher; vermilion, scarlet, the carmine red of pomegranate; all manner of blues: sky-blue, smalt, mid-ocean blue, beetle-wing black-blue; greens in every range - Bowing, nodding and smiling, Lady Desdea took Madouc to the royal dais, where a pretty little throne of gilded wood and ivory, with a pad of red felt on the seat and at the back, awaited her occupation.

Lady Desdea spoke in a confidential mutter: "For your information, Prince Bittern of Pomperol will be on hand today, also Prince Chalmes of Montferrone and Prince Garcelin of Aquitaine and several others of high degree."

Madouc stared at her blankly. "As you know, these persons are of no interest to me."

Lady Desdea smiled her tight grim smile. "Nevertheless, they will come before you, and look you over with care, to gauge your charm and discover your attributes. They will learn whether you are pocked or cross-eyed; wizened or

wild; afflicted with sores or mentally deficient, with high ears and low forehead. Now then! Compose yourself and sit quietly."

Madouc scowled. "No one else is on hand. Why should I sit here, like a bird on a post? It is foolishness. The seat looks uncomfortable. Why did they not give me a nice cushion? Both King Casrnir and Queen Sollace sit on pillows four inches thick. There is only a bit of red cloth on my seat."

"No matter! You will be pressing your bottom against it, not your eyes! Be seated, if you will!"

"This is the most uncomfortable throne in the world!"

"So it may be. Still, do not squirm around so, as if already you wished to visit the privy."

"For a fact, I do."

"Why did you not think of the matter before? There is no time for that now. The king and queen are entering the chamber!"

"You may be sure that both have emptied themselves to their heart's content," said Madouc. "I want to do the same. Is that not my privileged right, as a royal

princess?"

"I suppose so. Hurry, then."

Madouc went off without haste, and was in no hurry to return. Meanwhile the king and queen moved slowly across the hall, pausing to exchange a word or two with especially favored personages.

In due course Madouc returned. With an opaque glance toward Lady Desdea she sat upon the gilt and ivory throne, and after a long-suffering look up toward the ceiling, she settled herself.

The king and queen took their places; Prince Cassander entered from the side,

wearing a fine buff jacket, breeches of black twill embroidered with gold thread, a shirt of white lawn. He marched briskly across the hall, acknowledging the salutes of friends and acquaintances with debonair gestures, and took his place to the left of King Casmir.

Sir Mungo of Hatch, the Lord High Seneschal, came forward. A pair of heralds blew an abbreviated fanfare, the 'Apparens Regis', on the clarions and the hall became silent.

In sonorous tones Sir Mungo addressed the assemblage: "I speak with the voice of the royal family! We bid you

welcome to Sarris! We are joyful that you may share with us this most felicitous occasion-to wit: the eighteenth birthday of our beloved Prince Cassander!"

Madouc scowled and dropped her chin so that it rested on her clavicle. On sudden thought, she glanced sidewise and met the ophidian stare of Lady Desdea. Madouc sighed and gave a small despairing shrug. As if with great effort, she straightened in the chair and sat erect.

Sir Mungo concluded his remarks; the heralds blew another brief fanfare, and so commenced the reception. As the



guests stepped forward, Sir Mungo called out their names and degrees of nobility; the persons so identified paid their respects first to Prince Cassander, then to King Casmir, then to Queen Sollace and finally, in more or less perfunctory style, to Princess Madouc, who responded, generally with leaden disinterest, in a manner only barely acceptable to Queen Sollace and Lady Desdea.

The reception continued for what seemed to Madouc an eternity. Sir Mungo's voice droned on at length; the gentlemen and their ladies passing before her began to look much alike. At last, for entertainment, Madouc began

matching each newcomer with a beast or bird, so that this gentleman was Sir Bullock and that one Sir Weasel, while here was Lady Puffin and there was Lady Titmouse. On sudden thought Madouc looked to her right, where Lady Crow watched her with minatory eyes, then left, where sat Queen Milkcow.

The game palled. Madouc's haunches began to ache; she squirmed first to one side, then the other, then slouched back into the depths of the throne. By chance she met Lady Desdea's stare, and for a moment watched the angry signals with bland wonder. At last, with a painful sigh, Madouc squirmed herself once again erect.

With nothing better to do, Madouc looked around the hall, mildly curious as to which of the gentlemen present might be Prince Bittern of Pomperol, whose good opinion Lady Desdea considered so necessary. Perhaps he had already presented himself without her taking notice. Possible, thought Madouc. If so, she had surely failed to charm Prince Bittern, or win his admiration.

By the wall stood three youths, all evidently of high estate, in conversation with a gentleman of intriguing appearance though, if subtle indications were to be trusted, of no exalted rank. He was tall, spare, with short dust-colored locks clustered close around a

long droll face. His bright gray eyes were alive with vitality; his mouth was wide and seemed to be compressed always against a quirk of inner amusement. His garments, in the context of the occasion, seemed almost plain; despite his apparent lack of formal rank, he carried himself with no trace of deference for the noble company in which he found himself. Madouc watched him with approval. He and the three youths, so it seemed, had only just arrived; they still wore the garments in which they had traveled. The three were of an age to be the princes Lady Desdea had mentioned. One was gaunt, narrow-shouldered and ungainly, with lank yellow hair, a long pale chin and a

drooping woebegone nose. Could this be Prince Bittern? At this moment he turned to dart a somewhat furtive glance toward Madouc, who scowled, annoyed to be caught looking in his direction.

The press in front of the royal dais diminished; the three youths bestirred themselves and came forward to be presented. Sir Mungo announced the first of the three and Madouc's pessimism was validated. In orotund accents Sir Mungo declared: "We are honoured by the presence of the gallant Prince Bittern of Pomperol!"

Prince Bittern, attempting an easy camaraderie, saluted Prince Cassander

with a feeble smile and a jocular signal. Prince Cassander, raising his eyebrows, nodded politely, and inquired as to Prince Bittern's journey from Pomperol. "Most pleasant!" declared Prince Bittern. "Most pleasant indeed! Chalmes and I had some unexpected companionship along the way: excellent fellows both!"

"I noticed that you had come in company."

"Yes, quite so! We had a merry time of it!"

"I trust that you will continue to enjoy yourself."

"Indeed I shall! The hospitality of your house is famous!"

"It is pleasant to hear this."

Bittern moved on to King Casmir, while Cassander turned his attention to Prince Chalmes of Montferrone.

Prince Bittern was greeted graciously by both King Casmir and Queen Sollace. He then turned to face Madouc with barely concealed curiosity. For a moment he stood stock-still, at a loss as to what tone to take with her.

Madouc watched him expressionlessly. At last Prince Bittern performed a bow,

combining half-hearted gallantry with a trace of airy condescension. Since Madouc was only half his age and barely at the edge of adolescence, bluff facetiousness seemed in order.

Madouc was neither pleased nor impressed by Prince Bittern's mannerisms, and remained pointedly unresponsive to his lame jocularities. He bowed once more and moved quickly away.

His place was taken by Prince Chalmes of Montferrone: a stocky youth, short of stature, with coarse straight soot-black hair and a complexion marred by pocks and moles. By Madouc's calculation,



Prince Chalmes could be reckoned only marginally more ingratiating than Prince Bittern.

Madouc looked at the third of the group, now paying his respects to Queen Sollace. In her preoccupation with Prince Bittern and Prince Chalmes, she had not attended Sir Mungo's announcement; still she seemed to recognize this youth; somewhere, so she was assured, she had known him before. His stature was about average; he seemed easy and quick, sinewy rather than heavy of muscle, with square shoulders and narrow flanks. His hair was golden-brown, cut short across the forehead and ears; his eyes were gray-

blue and his features were crisp and regular. Madouc decided that he was not only handsome but undoubtedly of a pleasant disposition. She found him instantly likeable. Now if this had been Prince Bittern, the prospect of betrothal would not seem so utterly tragic. Not welcome, of course, but at least thinkable.

The youth spoke reproachfully: "You do not remember me?"

"I do," said Madouc. "But I can't remember when or where. Tell me."

"We met at Domreis. I am Dhrun."

### III

Tranquillity had come to the Elder Isles. From east to west, from north to south, throughout the numerous islands-after turbulent centuries of invasion, raid, siege, treachery, feud, rapine, arson and murder-town, coast and countryside alike were at peace.

A few isolated localities were special cases. The first of these was Wysrod, where King Audry's diffident troops marched up and down the dank glens and patrolled the stony fells in their efforts to defeat the coarse and insolent Celts, who jeered from the heights and moved through the winter mists like wraiths.

The second node of trouble affected the highlands of North and South Ulfiand, where the Ska outcast Torqual and his band of cutthroats committed atrocious crimes as the mood came upon them.

Otherwise the eight realms enjoyed what was at least a nominal amity. Few folk, however, considered the peace other than temporary and highly fragile. The general pessimism was based upon King Casmir's known intent to restore the throne Evandig and the Round Table, Cairbra an Meadhan-otherwise known as the Board of Notables-to its rightful place in the Old Hall at Haidion. King Casmir's ambitions went farther: he intended to bring all the Elder Isles

under his rule.

Casmir's plans were clear and almost explicit. He would strike hard into Dahaut, and hope to win a quick, easy and decisive victory over King Audry's enfeebled forces. Casmir would then merge the resources of Dahaut with his own and deal with King Aillas at his leisure.

Casmir was given pause only by the policy of King Aillas, whose competence Casmir had come to respect. Aillas had asserted that the safety of his own realm, which now embraced Troicinet, the Isle of Scola, Dascinet, North and South Ulfiand, depended upon

the separate existence of both Dahaut and Lyonesse. Further, he had let it be known that in the event of war, he would instantly range himself on the side of the party under attack, so that the aggressor must infallibly be defeated and his realm destroyed.

Casmir, assuming an attitude of benign indifference, merely intensified his preparations: reinforcing his armies, strengthening his fortresses and establishing supply depots at strategic points. Even more ominous, he gradually began to concentrate his power in the northeast provinces of Lyonesse, though the process was sufficiently deliberate that it could not be considered a

provocation.

Aillas noted these events with foreboding. He had no illusions in regard to King Casmir and his objectives; first, he would bring Pomperol and Blaloc into his camp either through alliance, facilitated by a royal marriage, or perhaps through intimidation alone. By such a process he had absorbed the old kingdom of Caduz, now a province of Lyonesse.

Aillas decided that Casmir's ominous pressure must be counteracted. To this end he dispatched Prince Dhrun with a suitable escort of dignitaries first to Falu Ffail at Avallon, thence to confer with

bibulous King Milo at Twissamy in Blaloc, then to King Kestrel's court at Gargano in Pomperol. In each instance, Dhrun delivered the same message, asserting the hope of King Aillas for continued peace, and promising full assistance in the event of attack from any quarter. In order that the declaration should not be considered provocative, Dhrun had been instructed to make the same pledge to King Casmir of Lyonesse.

Dhrun had long been invited to Prince Cassander's birthday celebration and had returned a conditional acceptance. As it happened, his mission went expeditiously and so, with time to spare,



Dhrun set off at best speed toward Sarris.

The journey took him down Icniel Way to Tatwillow Town on Old Street; here he took leave of his escort, who would continue south to Slute Skeme and there take ship to Domreis across the Lir.

Accompanied only by his squire Amery, Dhrun rode westward along Old Street to the village Tawn Twillet. Leaving Amery at the inn, he turned aside and rode north up Twamble

Lane, into the Forest of Tantrevalles. After two miles he came out on Lally Meadow, where Trilda, the manse of Shimrod the Magician, was situated at

the back of a flower garden.

Dhrun dismounted at the gate which gave upon the garden. Trilda was silent; a wisp of smoke from the chimney, however, indicated that Shimrod was in residency. Dhrun pulled on a dangling chain, to prompt a reverberating chime to sound from deep inside the manse.

A minute passed. As Dhrun waited, he admired the garden, which he knew to be tended during the night by a pair of goblin gardeners.

The door opened; Shimrod appeared. He welcomed Dhrun with affection and took him into the manse. Shimrod, so Dhrun

learned, had been making ready to depart Trilda on business of his own. He agreed to accompany Dhrun first to Sarris, and then on to Lyonesse Town. Here they would go their separate ways: Dhrun across the Lir to Domreis, Shimrod to Swer Smod, Murgan's castle on the stony flanks of the Teach tac Teach.

Three days passed by, and the time came to depart Trilda. Shimrod set out guardian creatures to protect the manse and its contents from marauders, then he and Dhrun rode away through the forest.

At Tawn Twillet they encountered another party on the route to Sarris,

consisting of Prince Bittern of Pomperol and Prince Chalmes of Montferrone, with their respective escorts. Dhrun, his squire Amery, and Shimrod joined the company and all travelled onward together.

Immediately upon their arrival at Sarris they were conducted to the Great Hall, that they might participate in the reception. They went to stand at the side of the hall, waiting for an opportunity to approach the dais. Dhrun took occasion to study the royal family, whom he had not seen for several years. King Casmir had changed little; he was as Dhrun remembered him: burly, florid; his round blue eyes as cold and secret as if formed

of glass. Queen Sollace sat like a great opulent statue, and some what more massive than the image in Dhrun's recollection. Her skin, as before, was as white as lard; her hair, rolled and piled on top of her head, was a billow of pale gold. Prince Cassander had become a swashbuckling young gallant: vain, self-important, perhaps a trifle arrogant. His appearance had changed little; his curls were as brassily yellow as ever; his eyes, like those of King Casmir, were round, an iota too close together, and somewhat minatory, or so it seemed.

And there, at the end of the dais, sat Princess Madouc, bored, aloof, half-sulking and clearly longing to be

elsewhere. Dhrun studied her a moment or two, wondering how much she knew in regard to the facts of her birth. Probably nothing, he surmised; who would inform her? Certainly not Casmir. So there sat Madouc, oblivious to the fairy blood which ran in her veins and which so noticeably set her apart from all the others on the dais. Indeed, thought Dhrun, she was a fascinating little creature, and by no means ill-favored.

The press at the royal dais diminished; the three princes went to present themselves to their hosts. Cassander's greeting to Dhrun was crisp but not unfriendly: "Ah, Dhrun, my good fellow! I am pleased to see you here! We must

have a good chat before the day is out; certainly before you leave!"

"I will look forward to the occasion," said Dhrun.

King Casmir's manner was more restrained, and even some what sardonic. "I have received reports in regard to your travels. It appears that you have become a diplomat at a very early age."

"Hardly that, Your Majesty! I am no more than the messenger of King Aillas, whose sentiments to you are the same as he has extended to the other sovereigns of the Elder Isles. He wishes you a long

reign and continued enjoyment of the peace and prosperity which now comforts us all. He further pledges that if you are wantonly attacked or invaded, and stand in danger, he will come to your aid with the full might of his united realms."

Casmir gave back a curt nod. "The undertaking is generous! Still, has he considered every contingency? Does he not have the slightest qualm that a pledge of such scope might in the end prove too far-reaching, or even dangerous?"

"I believe he feels that when peace-loving rulers stand firmly united against an aggressive threat, they ensure their



mutual safety, and that danger lies in any other course. How could it be otherwise?"

"Is it not obvious? There is no predicting the future. King Aillas might someday find himself committed to excursions far more perilous than any he now envisions."

"No doubt that is possible, Your Majesty! I shall report your concern to King Aillas. At the moment we can only hope that the reverse is a more probable event, and that our undertaking will help to keep the peace everywhere across the Elder Isles."

King Casmir said tonelessly: "What is peace? Balance three iron skewers tip to tip, one upon the other; at the summit, emplace an egg, so that it too poises static in mid-air, and there you have the condition of peace in this world of men."

Dhrun bowed once more and moved on to Queen Sollace. She favored him with a vague smile and a languid wave. "In view of your important affairs, we had given up hope of seeing you."

"I did my best to arrive on time, Your Highness. I would not like to miss so happy an occasion."

"You should visit us more often! After

all, you and Cassander have much in common."

"That is true, Your Highness. I will try to do as you suggest."

Dhrun bowed and moved aside, and found himself facing Madouc. Her expression, as she looked at him, was blank.

Dhrun spoke reproachfully: "You do not remember me?"

"I do-but I can't remember when or where. Tell me."

"We met at Domreis. I am Dhrun."

Madouc's face came alive with excitement. "Of course! You were younger!"

"And so were you. Noticeably younger."

Madouc turned a quick glance toward Queen Sollace. Leaning back in her throne, she was speaking over her shoulder to Father Umphred.

Madouc said: "We met even before, long ago, in the Forest of Tantrevalles. At that time we were the same age! What do you think of that?"

Dhrun stared dumbfounded. At last, trying to keep his voice light, he said:

"That meeting I do not recall."

"I expect not," said Madouc. "It was of very short duration. Probably we no more than looked at each other."

Dhrun grimaced. This was not a topic to be bruited about within the hearing of King Casmir. At last he found his voice. "How did you chance upon this extraordinary notion?"

Madouc grinned, clearly amused by Dhrun's perturbation. "My mother told me. You may rest easy; she also explained that I must keep the secret secure."

Dhrun heaved a sigh. Madouc knew the truth-but how much of the truth? He said: "Whatever the case, we can't discuss it here."

"My mother said that he-" Madouc jerked her head toward Casmir "-would kill you if he knew. Is that your understanding?"

Dhrun turned a furtive glance toward Casmir. "I don't know. We can't talk about it now."

Madouc gave an absentminded nod. "As you like. Tell me something. Yonder stands a tall gentleman wearing a green cape. Like you he seems familiar, as if I

have known him from some where before in my life. But I cannot remember the occasion."

"That is Shimrod the Magician. No doubt you encountered him at Castle Miraldra at the same time you met me."

"He has a most amusing face," said Madouc. "I think that I would like him."

"I am sure of it! He is an excellent fellow." Dhrun looked to the side. "I must move on; others are waiting to speak to you."

"There is still a moment or two," said Madouc. "Will you talk with me later?"

"Whenever you like!"

Madouc darted a glance toward Lady Desdea. "What I would like is not what they want me to do. I am supposed to be on display, and make a good impression, especially upon Prince Bittern and Prince Chalmes and those others who are trying to estimate my value as a spouse." Madouc spoke bitterly and the words came in a rush. "I like none of them! Prince Bittern has the face of a dead mackerel. Prince Chalmes struts and puffs and scratches his fleas. Prince Garcelin's fat belly wags back and forth as he walks. Prince Dildreth of Man has a tiny mouth with big red lips and bad teeth. Prince Morleduc of Ting has sores



on his neck, and little narrow eyes; I think he has a bad disposition, but perhaps he has sores elsewhere, which pain him when he sits. Duke Ccnac of Knook Keep is yellow as a Tartar. Duke Femus of Gaiway has a roaring voice and a gray beard and he says he is willing to marry me now." Madouc looked at Dhrun sadly. "You are laughing at me!"

"Are all the persons you meet so distasteful?"

"Not all."

"But Prince Dhrun is the worst?"

Madouc compressed her lips against a smile. "He is not as fat as Garcelin; he is livelier than Bittern; he wears no gray beard like Duke Femus nor does he roar; and his disposition seems better than that of Prince Morleduc."

"That is because I have no sores on my rump."

"Still-taken all with all-Prince Dhrun is not the worst of the lot." From the corner of her eye, Madouc noticed that Queen Sollace had turned her head, and was listening to the conversation with both ears. Father Umphred, standing at her back, beamed and nodded his head, as if in enjoyment of some private joke.

Madouc gave her head a haughty toss and turned back to Dhrun. "I hope that we will have occasion to speak again."

"I will make sure that we do."

Dhrun rejoined Shimrod.

"So then: how did it go?" asked Shimrod.

"The formalities are complete," said Dhrun. "I congratulated Cassander, warned King Casmir, flattered Queen Sollace and conversed with Princess Madouc, who is far and away the most amusing of the lot, and who also had the most provocative things to say."

"I watched you with admiration," said Shimrod. "You were the consummate diplomat in every detail. A skilled mummer could have done no better!"

"Do not feel deprived! There is still time for you to present yourself. Madouc especially wants to meet you."

"Really? Or are you concocting a fanciful tale?"

"Not at all! Even from across the room she finds you amusing."

"And that is a compliment?"

"I took it for such, although I must say

that Madouc's humor is somewhat wry and unexpected. She mentioned, quite casually, that she and I had met before, in the Forest of Tantrevalles. Then she sat grinning like a mischievous imp at my stupefaction."

"Amazing! Where did she gain the information?"

"The circumstances are not quite clear to me. Apparently she has visited the forest and met her mother, who provided the relevant facts."

"This is not good news. If she is as giddy and careless as her mother would seem to be, and lets the news slip to

King Casmir, your life will at once become precarious. Madouc must be enjoined to silence."

Dhrun looked dubiously toward Madouc, now engaged with the Duke Cypris of Skroy and his lady, the Duchess Pargot. "She is not so frivolous as she appears, and surely she will not betray me to King Casmir."

"Still, I will caution her." Shimrod watched Madouc for a moment. "She deals graciously enough with those two old personages, who would seem to be rather tiresome."

"I suspect that the rumors about her are

very wide of the mark."

"So it would seem. I find her quite appealing, at least from this distance."

Dhrun said pensively: "Someday a man will look deep into her blue eyes and there he will drown, and never be saved."

The Duke and Duchess of Skroy moved on. Madouc, noticing that she was the topic of discussion, sat as demurely erect on the gilt and ivory throne as ever Lady Desdea might have hoped. As it happened, she had made a favorable impression upon both Duke Cypris and Lady Pargot, and they spoke of Madouc

with approval to their friends, Lord Uls of Glyvern Ware and his stately spouse Lady Elsiflor. "How the rumors have flown about Madouc!" declared Lady Pargot. "She is said to be bold as old vinegar and wild as a lion. I insist that the reports are either malicious or exaggerated."

"True!" stated Duke Cypris. "We found her as modestly innocent as a little flower."

Lady Pargot went on. "Her hair is like a tumble of bright copper; she is truly quite striking!"

"Still, the girl is thin," Lord Uls pointed



out. "For adequacy and advantage, a female needs proper amplitude."

Duke Cypris gave qualified agreement. "A learned Moor has worked out the exact formula, though I forget the numbers: so many square inches of skin to so many hands in height. The effect must be sumptuous but neither expansive nor rotund."

"Quite so. That would be carrying the doctrine too far."

Lady Elsiflor gave a disapproving sniff. "I would not allow any Moor to count the areas of my skin, no matter how long his beard, nor yet might he measure my

stature in hands, as if I were a mare."

The Duchess Pargot spoke querulously: "Is there not a certain lack of dignity to the exposition?"

Lady Elsiflor agreed. "As for the Princess, I doubt if she will ever conform to the Moorish ideal. But for her pretty face, she might pass for a boy."

"All in good time!" declared Lord Uls. "She is still young in years."

Duchess Pargot turned a sidelong glance toward King Casmir, whom she disliked. "Still they are already shopping

her about; I find it quite premature."

"It is no more than display," declared Lord Uls bluffly. "They bait the hook and cast the line in order to learn which fish will strike."

The heralds blew the six-note fanfare: 'Recedens Regis'. King Casmir and Queen Sollace stood from their thrones and retired from the hail, that they might change into garments appropriate for the banquet. Madouc tried to slip away, but Devonet called out: "Princess Madouc, what of you? Shall we sit together at the banquet?"

Lady Desdea looked around. "Other

plans have been made. Come, Your Highness! You must freshen yourself and don your beautiful garden frock."

"I am well enough now," growled Madouc. "There is no need to change."

"Your opinions for once are irrelevant, in that they run counter to the queen's requirements."

"Why does she insist upon foolishness and waste? I will wear out these clothes changing them back and forth."

"The queen has the best of reasons for all her decisions. Come along with you."

Madouc sullenly allowed herself to be divested of her blue gown and dressed in a costume which, so she grudgingly decided, she liked equally well: a white blouse tied at the elbows with brown ribbons; a bodice of black velvet with a double row of small copper medallions down the front; a full pleated skirt of a bronze-russet similar to but less intense than the color of her curls.

Lady Desdea took her to the queen's drawing room, where they waited until Queen Sollace had completed her own change of costume. Then, with Devonet and Chiodys following modestly behind, the group repaired to the south lawn. Here, in the shade of three enormous old

oaks and only a few yards from the placid Glame, a lavish collation had been laid out upon a long trestle. Here and there around the lawn were arranged small tables set with napery, baskets of fruit, ewers of wine, as well as plates, goblets, bowls and utensils. Three dozen stewards clad in livery of lavender and green stood at their posts, stiff as sentinels, awaiting the signal from Sir Mungo to commence service.

Meanwhile, the company of guests stood in knots and groups awaiting the arrival of the royal party.

On the green lawn and against the sunny blue of the sky the colors of their costumes made a gorgeous display.

There were blues both light and dark, of lapis and of turquoise; purple, magenta and green; tawny orange, tan, buff and fusk; mustard ocher, the yellow of daffodil, rose pink, scarlet and pomegranate red. There were shirts and pleated bargoons of fine white silk, or Egyptian lawn; the hats were brave with many brims, sweeps, tiers, and plumes. Lady Desdea wore a relatively sedate gown of heather gray embroidered with red and black flowerets. As the royal party arrived on the lawn she took occasion to confer with Queen Sollace, who issued instructions to which Lady Desdea gave a bow of compliant understanding. She turned to speak with Madouc, only to discover that Madouc

was nowhere to be seen.

Lady Desdea exclaimed in vexation and called to Devonet. "Where is the Princess Madouc? A moment ago she stood by my side; she has darted away, like a weasel through the hedge!"

Devonet replied in a voice of whimsical and confidential scorn: "No doubt she trotted off to the privy."

"Ah! Always at the most awkward time!"

Devonet went on: "She said she had severely wanted to go for the last two hours."



Lady Desdea frowned. Devonet's manner was altogether too flippant, too knowing and too familiar. She said crisply: "All else aside, Princess Madouc is a cherished member of the royal family. We must be careful to avoid disrespect in our references!"

"I was only telling you the facts," said Devonet lamely.

"Just so. Still, I hope that you will take my remarks to heart." Lady Desdea swept away and went to post herself where she could intercept Madouc immediately upon her return from within the palace.

Minutes passed. Lady Desdea became impatient: where was the perverse little brat? What could she be up to?

King Casmir and Queen Sollace settled themselves at the royal table; the High Seneschal nodded to the steward-in-chief who clapped his hands together. Those guests still standing about the lawn seated themselves wherever convenient, in the company of relatives or friends, or with other persons whom they found congenial. Stewards in pairs stalked here and there with platters and trenchers, one to carry, another to serve. Contrary to the intentions of Queen Sollace, Prince Bittern

escorted the young Duchess Clavessa Montfoy of Sansiverre-this a small kingdom immediately north of Aquitaine. The duchess wore a striking gown of scarlet embroidered with black, purple and green peacocks, which suited her to remarkable advantage. She was tall, vivacious of movement, with luxuriant black hair, flashing black eyes, and an enthusiastic manner which stimulated Prince Bittern's most eager volubility.

Queen Sollace watched with cold disfavor. She had planned that Bittern should sit with Princess Madouc, that he might make her better acquaintance. Evidently this was not to be, and Sollace gave Lady Desdea a look of moist

reproach, prompting Lady Desdea to peer even more earnestly toward the structure of Sarris. Why did the princess tarry so long?

In point of fact, Madouc had tarried not an instant. As soon as Lady Desdea had turned her back, she slipped around the outskirts of the company to where Dhrun and Shimrod stood, beside the most remote of the oak trees. Madouc's arrival took them by surprise. "You come up on us with neither ceremony nor premonition," said Dhrun. "Luckily we were exchanging no secrets."

"I took care to use my best stealth," said Madouc. "I am free at last, until someone

searches me out." She went to stand behind the bole of the oak. "Even now I am not safe; Lady Desdea can see through stone walls."

"In that case, before you are dragged away, I will introduce my friend, Master Shimrod," said Dhrun. "He too can see through stone walls, and whenever he likes."

Madouc performed a prim curtsey, and Shimrod bowed. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I do not meet princesses every day!"

Madouc gave a rueful grimace. "I had rather be a magician, and see through

walls. Is it difficult to learn?"

"Quite difficult, but much depends upon the student. I have tried to teach Dhrun a sleight or two, but with only fair success."

"My mind is not flexible," said Dhrun. "I cannot think so many thoughts at once."

"That is the way of it, more often than not, and luckily so," said Shimrod.

"Otherwise, everyone would be a magician and the world would be an extraordinary place."

Madouc considered. "Sometimes I think as many as seventeen thoughts all

together."

"That is good thinking!" said Shimrod.  
"Murgan occasionally manages thirteen, or even fourteen, but afterward collapses into a stupor."

Madouc looked at him sadly. "You are laughing at me."

"I would never dare laugh at a royal princess! That would be impertinence!"

"No one would care. I am a royal princess only because Casmir makes the pretense-and only so that he can marry me to Prince Bittern, or someone similar."

Dhrun looked off across the lawn.  
"Bittern is fickle; he would make a poor match. Already he has turned his attention elsewhere. For the moment you are safe."

"I must issue a warning," said Shimrod.  
"Casmir is aware that you are a changeling, but he knows nothing of Suldrun's first-born son. Should he gain so much as an inkling, Dhrun would be in great danger."

Madouc peered around the tree to where King Casmir sat with Sir Ccnac of Knook Keep and Sir Lodweg of Cockaigne. "My mother cited the same warning. You need not worry; the secret



is safe."

"How did you happen to meet your mother?"

"I chanced to be in the forest, and there I met a wefkin named Zocco who taught me how to call my mother, and I did so."

"She came?"

"Instantly. At first she seemed a bit cross, but in the end she decided to be proud of me. She is beautiful, if somewhat airy in her manners. Nor can I help but think her capricious, giving away her lovely baby as if it were a sausage-especially when that lovely

baby was I. When I brought the subject up, she seemed more amused than otherwise, and claimed that I was subject to tantrums, which made the change only sensible."

"But you have outgrown these tantrums?"

"Oh yes, quite."

Shimrod mused upon the subject. "A fairy's thoughts can never be guessed. I have tried and failed; there is better hope of catching up quicksilver in your fingers."

Madouc said wisely: "Magicians must consort often with fairies, since both are

adepts in magic."

Shimrod gave his head a smiling shake. "We use different magics. When first I wandered the world, such creatures were new to me. I enjoyed their frolics and pretty fancies. Now I am more settled, and I no longer try to fathom fairy logic. Someday, if you like, I will explain the difference between fairy magic and sandestin magic, which is used by most magicians."

"Hm," said Madouc. "I thought that magic was magic, and that was all there was to it!"

"Not so. Sometimes simple magic seems

hard and hard magic seems simple. It is all very complicated. For instance-by your feet I see three dandelions. Pluck their pretty little blossoms."

Madouc bent and picked the three yellow blooms.

"Hold them between your two hands," said Shimrod. "Now, bring your hands to your face and kiss both thumbs together."

Madouc raised her hands to her face and kissed her thumbs. Instantly the soft blossoms became hard and heavy inside her hands. "Oh! They have changed! May I look?"

"You may look."

Madouc, opening her hands, discovered three heavy gold coins in place of the dandelion blossoms. "That is a fine trick! Can I do it myself?"

Shimrod shook his head. "Not now. It is not so easy as it seems. But you may keep the gold."

"Thank you," said Madouc. She inspected the coins some what dubiously. "If I should try to spend the coins, would they become flowers again?"

"If the magic had been done by fairies:

perhaps, perhaps not. By sandestin magic, your coins are gold and will remain gold. In fact, the sandestin may well have purloined them from King Casmir's strongbox, to save himself effort."

Madouc smiled. "More than ever I am anxious to learn some of these skills. It is useless asking my mother; she lacks all patience. I inquired about my father, but she claimed to remember nothing, not even his name."

"You mother seems a trifle airy, or even absentminded."

Madouc gave a regretful sigh.

"Absentminded or worse, and I still can show no pedigree, either long or short."

"Fairies are often careless in their connections," murmured Shimrod. "It is a sad case."

"Just so. My maidens-in-attendance call me 'bastard'," said Madouc ruefully. "I can only laugh at their ignorance, since they are referring to the wrong father."

"That is coarse conduct," said Shimrod. "I should think that Queen Sollace would disapprove."

Madouc shrugged. "In these cases I dispense my own justice. Tonight,

Chiodys and Devonet will find toads and turtles in their beds."

"The penalty is just, and would seem persuasive."

"Their minds are weak," said Madouc. "They refuse to learn, and tomorrow I will hear it all over again. At first opportunity I intend to search out my pedigree, no matter where it lies hidden."

Dhrun asked: "Where will you search? The evidence would seem to be scant, even non-existent."

"I have not thought the matter through,"



said Madouc. "Probably I will apply again to my mother and hope to stimulate her memory. If all else fails-" Madouc stopped short. "Chlodys has seen me! Look how she scampers off with the news!"

Dhrun frowned. "Your present company is not necessarily a scandal."

"No matter! They want me to beguile Prince Bittern, or perhaps Prince Garcelin, who sits yonder gnawing a pig's foot."

"The remedy is simple," said Shimrod. "Let us sit at a table and gnaw pigs' feet of our own. They will hesitate to alter

such definite arrangements."

"It is worth a trial," said Madouc.

"However, I will gnaw no pig's foot. I much prefer a roast pheasant well-basted with butter."

"So do I," said Dhrun. "A few leeks to the side and some bread will suit me nicely."

"Well then: let us dine," said Shimrod.

The three seated themselves at a table in the shade of the oak, and were served from great silver salvers by the stewards.

Lady Desdea meanwhile had gone to take instruction from Queen Sollace. The two engaged in a hurried conference, after which Lady Desdea marched purposefully across the lawn to the table where Madouc sat with Dhrun and Shimrod. She stopped beside Madouc and spoke in a voice carefully controlled: "Your Highness, I must inform you that Prince Bittern has urgently begged that you do him the honour of dining in his company. The queen desires that you accede to his request, and at once."

"You must be mistaken," said Madouc. "Prince Bittern is absolutely fascinated by that tall lady with the long nose."

"That is the distinguished Duchess Clavessa Montfoy. However, please take note: Prince Cassander has persuaded her to take a turn on the river before proceeding with the banquet. Prince Bittern now sits alone."

Madouc turned to look; indeed, Prince Cassander and the Duchess Clavessa were strolling off toward the dock, where three punts floated in the shade of a weeping willow. The Duchess Clavessa, although perplexed by Prince Cassander's proposal, continued to exercise her usual effervescence, and chattered away at a great rate. Prince Cassander was less effusive; he conducted himself with urbane

politeness but no great zest. As for Prince Bittern, he sat looking after the Duchess Clavessa, slack-jawed and glum.

Lady Desdea told Madouc: "As you see, Prince Bittern is anxiously awaiting your presence."

"Not so! You misread his posture. He is anxious to join Cassander and Duchess Clavessa on the river."

Lady Desdea's eyes glittered. "You must obey the queen! She feels that your place is properly with Prince Bittern."

Dhrun spoke in cold tones: "You would

seem to imply that the princess now sits in unsuitable or demeaning company. If this discourtesy is carried any farther, I will instantly protest to King Casmir, and ask him to deal with what would seem a gross breach of etiquette."

Lady Desdea blinked and drew back. She performed a stiff bow. "Naturally I intended no discourtesy. I am only an instrument of the queen's wishes."

"The queen, then, must be at some misapprehension. The princess does not wish to deprive us of her company, and she seems quite at her ease; why create a fiasco?"

Lady Desdea could proceed no farther.  
She curtseyed and departed.

With a drooping mouth Madouc watched her go. "She will take vengeance-needlework and more needlework for hours on end."

Madouc turned a thoughtful glance upon Shimrod. "Can you teach me to transform Lady Desdea into an owl, if only for a day or so?"

"Transformations are complicated," said Shimrod. "Each step is critical; if a single syllable went awry, Lady Desdea might become a harpy or an orc, with the whole countryside at peril. You must

delay transformations until you are more experienced."

"I am apt at magic, according to my mother. She taught me the 'Tinkle-toe Imp-spring', that I might fend off bandits or louts."

"I don't know that particular effect," said Shimrod. "At least, not by that name."

"It is simple enough." Madouc looked here and there, around the lawn and down the slope toward the river. Near the dock she took note of Prince Cassander, who was politely seating Duchess Clavessa in a punt, while at the same time making a gallant remark.



Madouc arranged thumb and finger, muttered: "Fwip!" and jerked her chin. Prince Cassander gave a startled outcry and jumped into the river.

"That was the low strength or low virtue method," said Madouc. "The other two virtues are more notable. I saw Zocco the wefkin jump a good six feet into the air."

"That is a fine technique," said Shimrod. "It is neat, quick and of nice effect. Evidently you have not used the 'Tinkle-toe' in any of its virtues upon Lady Desdea?"

"No. It seems a bit extreme, and I would

not want her to jump past her ordinary ability."

"Let me think," said Shimrod. "There is a lesser effect known as the 'Sissle-way', which also comes in three gradations: the 'Subsurrus', the 'Sissle-way Ordinary', and the 'Chatter-fang'."

"I would like to learn this effect."

"The sleight is definite but subtle. You must whisper the activator-schkt-then point your little finger, thus and so, and then you must hiss softly-like this."

Madouc jerked and twitched, her teeth rattling and vibrating. "Ow-wow!" said

Madouc.

"That," said Shimrod, "is the first virtue, or the 'Subsurrus'. As you have noticed, the effect is transient. For greater urgency, one uses the 'Ordinary', with a double hiss: 'Sss-sss'. The third level is, of course, the 'Chatter-fang', where the activator is used twice."

Dhrun asked: "And what of three hisses and three activators?"

"Nothing. The effect is vitiated. Speak the activator, if you like, but do not hiss, since you might startle some unsuspecting person."

"Schkt, " said Madouc. "Is that correct?"

"It is close. Try again, like this: Schkt."

"Schkt."

"Precisely right, but you must practice until it becomes second nature."

"Schkt. Schkt. Schkt."

"Well done! Do not hiss, please."

They paused to watch Prince Cassander slouching despondently across the lawn toward Sarris. Meanwhile Duchess Clavessa had rejoined Prince Bittern, and had resumed her conversation where

it had been left off.

"All worked out well," said Shimrod.  
"And here is the steward with a platter of roast pheasants. This is culinary magic with which I cannot compete. Steward, be so good as to serve us all, and do not stint."

## IV

The celebration had run its course, and Sarris was once more tranquil. In the estimation of King Casmir, the event had gone moderately well. He had entertained his guests with suitable amplitude which, while falling short of the lavish extravagance favored by King

Audry, still would go far to dispel his reputation for parsimony.

Jocundity and good fellowship had ruled the occasion. Save for Cassander's fall into the river, there had been neither bitter words nor quarrels between old enemies, nor incidents which might have provoked new resentments. Meanwhile, because of Casmir's insistence upon informality, the questions of precedence, which often gave rise to embarrassing disputes, were avoided.

A few disappointments marred the general satisfaction. Queen Sollace had urged that Father Umphred be allowed to utter a benediction before the banquet.

King Casmir, who detested the priest, would hear none of it, and the queen indulged herself in a fit of pink-nosed sulks. Further, Princess Madouc had not perceptibly helped her prospects: perhaps to the contrary. It had long been planned that Madouc should show herself to be a mild and winsome young maiden who must inevitably develop into a lovely damsel renowned for her charm, decorum and sympathy. Madouc, while reasonably polite or, at worst, apathetic with the older guests, produced a different version of herself for the young grandees who came to study her attributes, and showed herself to be irresponsible, perverse, elusive, sarcastic, wrongheaded, supercilious,

sulky and so tart in her comments as to verge upon the insulting. Morleduc's disposition, already questionable, had not been improved by Madouc's innocent question as to whether sores covered his entire body. When the vain and arrogant Sir Blaise<sup>8</sup> of Benwick in Armorica disposed himself before her, looked her up and down with cool detachment and remarked, "I must say, Princess Madouc, you do not at all resemble the naughty little harriidan that your reputation suggests," Madouc replied in her silkiest voice: "That is good to hear. Nor do you seem a perfumed popinjay, as I have heard you described, since your scent is not one of



perfume." Sir Blaise bowed curtly and departed. And so it went with all the others, excepting only Prince Dhrun, which brought King Casmir no pleasure. A connection in this quarter would advance his policies not at all-unless, of course, Madouc could be persuaded to transmit to him the state secrets of Troicinet. King Casmir gave the idea only cursory consideration.

At the first opportunity Lady Desdea expressed her dissatisfaction to Madouc. "Everyone is most upset with you."

"What is it this time?" asked Madouc, her blue eyes innocent.

"Come now, young lady!" snapped Lady Desdea. "You ignored our plans and flouted our desires; my careful instruction was no more than the droning of an insect. So then!" Lady Desdea drew herself up to her full height. "I have taken counsel with the queen. She has decided that your conduct calls out for correction, and wishes me to use my best judgment in the matter."

"You need not exert yourself," said Madouc. "The celebration is over; the princes have gone home and my reputation is secure."

"But it is the wrong reputation. In consequence, you shall be set to double

lessons for the rest of the summer. Further, you will not be allowed to ride your horse, nor even go near the stables. Is that clear?"

"Oh yes," said Madouc. "It is very clear."

"You may resume your needlework at this moment," said Lady Desdea. "I believe that you will find Devonet and Chiodys in the parlor."

Rainy weather came to Sarris and lingered for three days. Madouc wistfully occupied herself with the schedule arranged for her by Lady Desdea, which included not only

interminable hours of needlework, but also dancing lessons of a particularly tiresome nature. Late in the afternoon of the third day heavy clouds drifted across the sky, bringing a night of rain. In the morning the clouds were gone and the sun rose into a fresh and smiling world, fragrant with the odors of wet foliage.

Lady Desdea went to the small refectory where Madouc was accustomed to take her breakfast, but found only Devonet and Chiodys, neither of whom had seen Madouc. Odd, thought Lady Desdea. Could Princess Madouc have kept to her bed, by reason of illness? Perhaps the princess had gone early to the conservatory for her dancing lesson?

Lady Desdea went to investigate, only to find Master Jocelyn standing idly by the window, while the four musicians, playing lute, pipes, drums and flute, rehearsed tunes from their repertory.

Master Jocelyn, in response to Lady Desdea's question, merely shrugged. "And if she were here: what then? She cares nothing for what I teach her; she skips and jumps; she hops on one leg like a bird. I ask: 'Is that how you will dance at the Grand Ball?' And she replies: 'I am not a devotee of this foolish strutting and smirking. I doubt if I will be present.'"

Lady Desdea muttered under her breath

and turned away. She went outside to look up and down the terrace, just in time to discover Madouc perched proudly on the seat of a pony-cart with Tyfer trotting briskly off across the meadow.

Lady Desdea gave a cry of outrage, and sent a footman to ride after the pony-cart and bring the truant princess back to Sarris.

A few minutes later the pony-cart returned, Madouc now crestfallen and Tyfer moving at a slow walk.

"Be so good as to dismount," said Lady Desdea.

Madouc, her face screwed up into a resentful scowl, jumped to the ground.

"Well then, Your Highness? You were expressly forbidden to use your horse or to go near the stables."

"That wasn't what you said!" cried Madouc. "You told me that I was not to ride Tyfer, and I am not doing so! I summoned the stableboy Pymfyd and required that he bring up the cart, so I never so much as approached the stables."

Lady Desdea stared with twitching lips. "Very well! I will rephrase the order. You are forbidden to use your horse, or

any other horse, or any other beast, be it cow, goat, sheep, dog, or bullock, or any other means of propulsion, on any sort of vehicle or mode of transportation, including carts, carriages, wagons, boats, sleds, palanquins and litters. That should define the exact scope of the queen's command. Second, even as you tried to evade the queen's command, you also became remiss with your lessons. What is your response to this?"

Madouc made a brave gesture. "Today the rain is gone and the world is bright, and I preferred to be out in the air, rather than toiling over Herodotus or Junifer Algo, or practicing calligraphy or pricking my fingers at needlework."



Lady Desdea turned away. "I will not argue with you the relative merits of learning versus torpid idleness. What must be done, we will do."

Three days later Lady Desdea, in a troubled spirit, reported to Queen Sollace. "I do my best with Princess Madouc, but I seem to achieve nothing."

"You must not be discouraged!" said the queen.

A maid brought a silver dish on which were arranged twelve ripe figs. She placed the dish on a tabouret close by the queen's elbow. "Shall I peel, Your Highness?"

"Please do."

Lady Desdea's voice rose in pitch.

"Were it not disrespectful, I might declare Her Highness a red-headed little brat who needs nothing more than a good whisking."

"No doubt she is a trial. But continue as before, and brook no nonsense." Queen Sollace tasted one of the figs, and rolled up her eyes in pleasure. "Here is perfection!"

"Another matter," said Lady Desdea. "Something very strange is going on, which I must bring to your attention."

Queen Sollace sighed and leaned back in the cushions of the divan. "Cannot I be spared these intricate complexities? Sometimes, my dear Ottilie, and despite your good intentions, you become most tiresome."

Lady Desdea could have wept for sheer frustration. "It is all the more tiresome for me! Indeed, I am baffled! The circumstances transcend anything I have known before!"

Queen Sollace accepted another plump fig from the maid. "How so?"

"I will recite to you the facts exactly as they occurred. Three days ago I had

reason to reprimand Her Highness for scamping her work. She seemed unconcerned-pensive rather than remorseful. As I turned away, an extraordinary sensation struck through every fiber of my being! My skin tingled, as if I had been whipped by nettles! Blue lights flashed and flared before my eyes! My teeth set up an uncontrollable rattling that I thought must never cease! I assure you that it was an alarming sensation!"

Queen Sollace, munching at the fig, considered Lady Desdea's complaint. "Odd. You have never taken such a fit before?"

"Never! But there is more! At the same

time I thought to hear a faint sound issuing from Her Highness! A hiss, almost inaudible."

"It might have been an expression of shock or surprise," mused Queen Sollace.

"So it might seem. I will cite another incident, which occurred yesterday morning, as Princess Madouc took breakfast with Devonet and Chiodys. There was an exchange of banter and the usual giggling. Then as I watched dumbfounded, Devonet lifted the milk jug, that she might pour milk into her bowl. Instead, her hand jerked and she poured the milk across her neck and

chest, and all the while her teeth were chattering like castanets. Finally she dropped the jug and rushed from the room. I followed, that I might learn the reason for her strange convulsion. Devonet declared that the Princess Madouc had prompted her to the act by uttering a soft hiss. There was no real provocation, according to Devonet. She informed me: 'I only said that while bastards might wet into silver chamber pots, they still lacked the most precious of all, a fine pedigree!' I asked: 'And then what?' 'And then I reached for the milk jug; I lifted it and poured milk all over myself, while Madouc sat grinning and making a hissing sound.' And that is what happened to Devonet."

Queen Sollace sucked at her fingers, then wiped them on a damask napkin. "It sounds to me like simple carelessness," said Queen Sollace. "Devonet must learn to grasp the jug more firmly."

Lady Desdea gave a scornful sniff. "And what of Princess Madouc's cryptic grin?"

"Perhaps she was amused. Is that not possible?"

"Yes," said Lady Desdea grimly. "It is possible. But, once again, listen to this! As a penalty, I assigned Her Highness double lessons: in orthography,

grammar, needlework and dancing; also special texts in genealogy, astronomy, the geometries of Aristarchus, Candascas and Euclid. I also assigned readings from the works of Matreo, Orgon Photis, Junifer Algo, Panis the Ionian, Dalziel of Avallon, Ovid and one or two others."

Queen Sollace shook her head in bemusement. "I found Junifer always a bore, nor could I make head nor tail of Euclid."

"I am sure Your Majesty was more than clever at your lessons; it reveals itself in your conversation."



Sollace looked off across the room, and did not respond until she had thoroughly masticated another fig. "Well then: what of the readings?"

"I deputed Chlodys to attend Madouc as she read, to make sure that she was supplied the proper texts. This morning Chlodys reached to take a fine volume of Dalziel from the shelf and felt a spasm come over her, which caused her to throw the book high into the air and set her teeth to chattering. She came running to me in complaint. I took Princess Madouc for her dancing lesson. The musicians set up a nice tune; Master Jocelyn declared that he would now demonstrate the step he wished the

princess to learn. Instead he jumped six feet into the air, with his feet twirling and toes pointed as if he were a dervish. When at last he descended to the floor, Madouc said that it was a step she did not care to try. She asked me if I cared to demonstrate the step, but there was something in her smile which prompted me to refuse. Now, I am at my wit's end."

Queen Sollace accepted a fig from the maid. "That will be all; I am almost sated with these wonderful morsels; they are as sweet as honey!" She turned to Lady Desdea. "Proceed as before; I can advise you no better,"

"But you have heard the problems!"

"It might be coincidence, or fancy, or even a bit of hysteria. We cannot let such silly panics affect our policy."

Lady Desdea cried another protest, but Queen Sollace held up her hand. "No, not another word! I have heard all I care to hear."

The drowsy days of summer passed: fresh dawns, with dew on the lawns and bird calls floating through the air from far distances; then the bright mornings and golden afternoons, followed by orange, yellow and red sunsets; then the blue-gray dusk and at last the starry

nights, with Vega at the zenith, Antares to the south, Altair in the east and Spica declining in the west. Lady Desdea had discovered a convenient way to deal with Madouc since her unproductive and frustrating report to Queen Sollace. She spoke in a grim monotone, assigning the lessons and stating the schedule, then with a scornful sniff and a stiff back she departed and gave no further heed either to Madouc or her achievements. Madouc accepted the system and pursued only the reading which interested her. Lady Desdea, in her turn, discovered that life had become less of a trial. Queen Sollace was content to hear no more of Madouc's transgressions, and in her conversations with Lady Desdea

avoided all reference to Ma douc.

After a week of relative placidity, Madouc delicately mentioned 'Tyfer and his need for exercise. Lady Desdea said crossly:

"The proscription derives not from me but from Her Majesty. I can grant no permission. If you ride your horse, you risk the queen's displeasure. But it is all one to me."

"Thank you," said Madouc. "I feared that you might be difficult."

"Ha hah! Why should I beat my head against a rock?" Lady Desdea started to

turn away, then halted. "Tell me: where did

you learn that opprobrious little trick?"

"The 'Sissle-way'? It was taught to me by Shimrod the Magician, that I might defend myself against tyrants."

"Hmf." Lady Desdea departed. Madouc at once took herself to the stables, where she ordered Sir Pom-Pom to saddle up Tyfer and prepare for an excursion across the countryside.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## I

Shimrod rode in company with Dhrun to Lyonesse Town, where Dhrun, with Amery, took passage to Domreis aboard a Troice cog. Shimrod watched from the quayside until the tawny sails dwindled across the horizon, then went to a nearby inn and seated himself in the shade of a grape arbor. Over a platter of sausages and a mug of ale he considered the possibilities of the next few days and what might lie in store for him.

The time had come when he must take

himself to Swer Smod, that he might confer with Murgén and learn whatever needed learning. The prospect did not lift his spirits. Murgén's dreary disposition blended well with the somber and darkling atmosphere of Swer Smod; his sour smile was equivalent to another man's wild frivolity. Shimrod knew well what to expect at Swer Smod and prepared himself accordingly; had he discovered good cheer and merrymaking, he would have wondered as to Murgén's sanity.

Shimrod left the arbor and went to a baker's booth, where he bought two large honeycakes, each packed in a reed basket. One of the cakes was sprinkled



with chopped raisins, the other was cast over with nuts. Shimrod took up the cakes and stepped around to the back of the booth. The baker, assured that Shimrod had gone to relieve himself, ran out to remonstrate. "Hold hard, sir! Go elsewhere for such business! I want no great chife in the air; it is poor advertisement!" He halted, looking right and left. "Where are you, sir?" He heard a mutter, a whimper, a rush of wind. Something whisked up at a blur and away from his vision, but of Shimrod there was naught to be seen.

Slow of foot the baker returned to the front of his booth but told no one of the event, for fear of being thought over-

imaginative.

## II

Shimrod was transported to a stony flat high on the slopes of the Teach tac Teach, with the panorama to the east swathed under the Forest of Tantrevalles out to the edge of vision. The walls of Swer Smod rose at his back: a set of massive rectangular shapes, meshed and merged, stacked and layered, with three towers of unequal height rising about all, like sentinels surveying the landscape.

Shimrod's approach to the castle was obstructed by a stone wall eight feet high. At the portal hung a sign he had not

seen before. Black symbols conveyed a daunting admonition:

WARNING!

TRESPASSERS! WAYFARERS!  
ALL OTHERS!

ADVANCE AT RISK!

If you cannot read these words, cry out 'KLARO!' and the sign will declare the message aloud.

PROCEED NO FARTHER, AT  
PERIL OF DEATH!

In case of need, consult Shimrod the

Magician, at his manse Trilda, in the Great Forest of Tantrevalles.

Shimrod halted at the portal and surveyed the yard beyond. Nothing had changed since his last visit. On guard were the same two gryphs: Vus, mottled moss-green, and maroon-red Vuwas, whose color was that of old blood, or raw liver. Both stood eight feet tall, with massive torsos clad in plaques of horny carapace. Vus displayed a crest of six black spikes, to which, in his vanity, he had affixed a number of medals and emblems. Vuwas wore across his scalp and down the nape of his neck a stiff brush of black-red fibers. Not to be outdone by Vus, he had attached several

fine pearls to this bristle. Vus and Vuwas, at this moment, sat beside their sentinel box, hunched over a chessboard wrought from black iron and bone. The pieces stood four inches high, and cried out as they were moved, in derision, shock, outrage, or occasionally approval. The gryphs paid no heed to the comments and played their own game.

Shimrod pushed through the iron gate and entered the fore court. The gryphs glared hot-eyed over their pronged shoulders. Each ordered the other to rise up and kill Shimrod; each demurred. "Do you take me for a fool?" demanded Vuwas. "In my absence, you would make three illicit moves and no doubt abuse

my pieces. It is you who must do your duty, and at this very moment."

"Not I!" said the moss-green Vus. "Your remarks merely indicate what you yourself have in mind. While I killed this sheep-faced fool, you would push my reignet into limbo and baffle my darkdog into the corner."

Vuwas growled to Shimrod over his shoulder: "Go away; it is simpler for everyone. We avoid the trouble of killing you, and you need not worry about arranging your affairs."

"Out of the question," said Shimrod. "I am here on important business. Do you

not recognize me? I am Murgan's scion Shimrod."

"We remember nothing," grunted Vuwas.  
"One earthling looks much like another."

Vus pointed to the ground. "Wait where you stand until we finish our game. This is a critical juncture!"

Shimrod sauntered over to inspect the chessboard. The gryphs paid him no heed.

"Ludicrous," said Shimrod after a moment.

"Hist!" snarled Vuwas, the maroon-red

gryph. "We will tolerate no interference!"

Vus looked around challengingly: "Do you intend insult? If so, we will tear you limb from limb on the spot!"

Shimrod asked: "Can a cow be insulted by the word 'bovine'? Can a bird be insulted by the word 'flighty'? Can a pair of bumbling mooncalves be insulted by the word 'ludicrous'?"

Vuwas spoke sharply: "Your hints are not clear. What are you trying to tell us?"

"Simply that either of you could win the game with a single move."



The gryphs glumly examined the board.  
"How so?" asked Vus.

"In your case, you need only conquer this bezander with your caitiff, then march the arch-priestess forward to confront the serpent, and the game is yours."

"Never mind all that!" snapped Vuwas.  
"How might I win?"

"Is it not obvious? These mordykes stand in your way. Strike them aside with your ghost, like this, whereupon your caitiffs have the freedom of the board."

"Ingenious," said Vus the mottled green gryph. "Those moves, however, are

considered improper on the world Pharsad. Further, you have called the pieces by their wrong names, and also you have disarranged the board!"

"No matter," said Shimrod. "Simply replay the game, and now I must be on my way."

"Not so fast!" cried out Vuwas. "There is still a small task to be accomplished!"

"We were not born yesterday," stated Vus. "Prepare for death."

Shimrod put the reed baskets on the table. Vuwas the dark red gryph asked suspiciously: "What is in the baskets?"

"They contain honeycakes," said Shimrod. "One of the cakes is somewhat larger and more tasty than the other."

"Aha!" said Vus. "Which is which?"

"You must open the baskets," said Shimrod. "The larger cake is for whichever of you is the most deserving."

"Indeed!"

Shimrod sauntered off across the forecourt. For a moment there was silence behind him, then a mutter, then a sharp remark, an equally sharp retort, followed by a sudden outburst of horrid snarls, bellows, thuds and tearing

sounds.

Traversing the forecourt, Shimrod climbed three steps to a stone porch. Stone columns framed an alcove and a ponderous black iron door, twice his height and wider than his arms could span. Black iron faces looked through festoons of black iron vines; black iron eyes watched Shimrod with sardonic curiosity. Shimrod touched a stud; the door swung open to the grinding of iron on iron. He stepped through the opening, into a high-ceilinged entry hail. To right and left pedestals supported a pair of stone statues, of exaggerated attenuation, robed and cowed so that the gaunt faces remained in shadow. No servitor

appeared; Shimrod expected none. Murgan's servitors were more often than not invisible.

The way was familiar to Shimrod. He passed through the entry hall into a long gallery. At regular intervals, tail portals opened into chambers serving a variety of functions. There was no one to be seen nor any sound to be heard; an almost unnatural stillness held Swer Smod.

Shimrod walked along the gallery without haste, looking into the chambers on either side to discover what changes had been made since his last visit. Often the chambers were dark, and usually

empty. Some served conventional purposes; others were dedicated to a use less ordinary. In one of these chambers Shimrod discovered a tall woman standing before an easel, back turned to the doorway. She wore a long gown of gray-blue linen; cloud-white hair was gathered at the nape of her neck by a ribbon, then hung down her back. The easel supported a panel; using brushes and pigments from a dozen clay pots, the woman worked to create an image on the surface of the panel.

Shimrod watched a moment, but could not clearly define the nature of the image. He entered the chamber, that he might observe at closer range and

perhaps with better understanding, but had no great success. The pigments looked to be an identical heavy black, allowing the woman small scope for contrast, or so it seemed to Shimrod. He moved a step closer, then another. At last he was able to perceive that each pigment, anomalous and strange to his eyes, quivered with a particular subtle luster unique to itself. He studied the panel; the shapes formed by the black oozes swam before his vision; neither their definition nor their pattern were at all obvious.

The woman turned her head; with blank white eyes she looked at Shimrod. Her expression remained vague; Shimrod

was not sure that she saw him, but it could not be that she was blind! The case would be self-contradictory!

Shimrod smiled politely. "It is an interesting work that you do," he said. "The composition, however, is not quite clear to me."

The woman made no response, and Shimrod wondered if she might also be deaf. In a somber mood he left the chamber and continued along the gallery to the Great Hall. Again, no foot man or other servitor stood on hand to announce him; Shimrod passed through the portal, into a chamber so high that the ceiling was lost among the shadows. A line of



narrow windows halfway down one of the walls admitted pale light from the north; flames in the fireplace provided a more cheerful illumination. The walls were panelled with oak but bare of decoration. A heavy table occupied the center of the room. Cabinets along the far wall displayed books, curios and miscellaneous oddments; to the side of the mantelpiece a glass globe, charged with glowing green plasma, hung by a silver wire from the ceiling; within huddled the curled skeleton of a weasel, skull peering through high haunches.

Murgen stood by the table, looking down into the fire: a man of early maturity, well-proportioned but of no particular

distinction. Such was his ordinary semblance, in which he felt most comfortable. He acknowledged Shimrod's presence with a glance and casual wave of the hand.

"Sit," said Murgan. "I am glad that you are here; in fact, I was about to summon you, that you might deal with a moth."

Shimrod seated himself by the fire. He looked around the chamber. "I am here, but I see no moth."

"It has disappeared," said Murgan.  
"How was your journey?"

"Well enough. I came by way of Castle

Sarris and Lyonesse Town, in company with Prince Dhrun."

Murgen settled into a chair beside Shimrod. "Will you eat or drink?"

"A goblet of wine might calm my nerves. Your devils are more horrid than ever. You must curb their truculence."

Murgen made an indifferent gesture. "They serve their purpose."

"Far too well, in my opinion," said Shimrod. "Should one of your honoured guests be late in arrival, do not be offended; it is likely that the devils have torn him to bits."

"I entertain seldom," said Murgan. "Still, since you are so definite, I will suggest that Vus and Vuwas moderate their vigilance."

A silver-haired sylph, barelegged, drifted into the hall. She carried a tray on which rested a blue glass flask and a pair of goblets, twisted and worked into quaint shapes. She placed the tray on the table, turned Shimrod a quick sideglance and decanted two goblets of dark red wine. One of these she offered to Shimrod, the other to Murgan, then drifted from the hall as silently as she had come.

For a moment the two drank wine from

the blue glass goblets in silence. Shimrod studied the suspended green-glowing globe. Black glittery beads in the small skull seemed to return his scrutiny. Shimrod asked: "Is it yet alive?"

Murgen looked over his shoulder. The black beads again appeared to shift to meet Murgen's gaze. "The dregs of Tamurello perhaps still exist: his tincture so to speak, or perhaps the verve of the green gas itself is responsible."

"Why do you not destroy the globe, gas and all, and be done with it?"

Murgen made a sound of amusement. "If I knew all there was to be known, I might do so. Or, on the other hand, I might not do so. Consequently, I delay. I am both wary and chary of disturbing what seems a stasis."

"But it is not truly a stasis?"

"There is never a stasis."

Shimrod made no comment. Murgen continued. "I am warned by my instincts. They tell me of movement, furtive and slow. Someone wishes to catch me as I drowse, complacent and bloated with power. The possibility is real; I cannot look in all directions at once."

"But who has the will to work such a strategy? Surely not Tamurello!"

"Perhaps not Tamurello."

"Who else, then?"

"There is a recurrent question which troubles me. At least once each day I ask myself: where is Desmei?"

"She disappeared, after creating Carfilhiot and Melancthe; that is the general understanding."

Murgen's mouth took on a wry twist.  
"Was it all so simple?"

Did Desmei truly entrust her revenge to the likes of Carfilhiot and Melancthe-the one a monster, the other an unhappy dreamer?"

"Desmei's motives have always been a puzzle," said Shimrod. "Admittedly, I have never studied them in depth."

Murgen gazed into the fire. "From nothing came much. Her malice was kindled by what seems a trivial impulse: Tamurello's rejection of her erotic urge. Why, then, the elaborations? Why did she not simply revenge herself upon Tamurello? Was Melancthe intended to serve as her instrument of vengeance? If so, her plans went awry. Carfilhiot



ingested the green fume, while Melanthe barely sensed its odor."

"Still, the memory seems to fascinate her," said Shimrod.

"It would seem a most seductive stuff. Tamurello consumed the green pearl; now he crouches in the globe, and the green suffusion surrounds him to a surfeit. He gives no evidence of Joy."

"This in itself might be considered the vengeance of Desmei."

"It seems too paltry. For Desmei, Tamurello represented not only himself but all his kind. There are no gauges to

measure such malice; one can only feel and wonder."

"And cringe."

"It is instructive, perhaps, to note that Desmei in her creation of Melancthe and Carfilhiot used a demon magic derived from Xabiste. The green gas may itself be Desmei, in a form imposed upon her by the condition of Xabiste. If so, she is no doubt anxious to resume a more conventional shape."

"Are you suggesting that Desmei and Tamurello are bottled together in the globe?"

"It is only an idle thought. Meanwhile I guard Joald and soothe his monstrous hulk, and ward away whatever might disturb his long wet rest. When time permits, I study the demon magic of Xabiste, which is slippery and ambiguous. Such are my preoccupations."

"You mentioned that you were about to call me here to Swer Smod."

"Quite so. The conduct of a moth has caused me concern."

"An ordinary moth?"

"So it would seem."

"And I am here to deal with this moth?"

"The moth is more significant than you imagine. Yesterday, just before dusk, I came through the door and, as always, took note of the globe. I saw that a moth had apparently been attracted by the green light and had settled upon the surface. As I watched, it crawled to where it could look into Tamurello's eyes. I immediately summoned the sandestin Rylf, who informed me that I saw not a moth but a shybalt from Xabiste."

Shimrod's jaw dropped. "That is bad news."

Murgen nodded. "It means that a strand of communication is open-between whatever resides in the globe and someone else where."

"What then?"

"When the moth-shybalt flew away, Rylf assumed the form of a dragonfly and followed. The moth crossed the mountains and flew down the Vale of Evander to the city Ys."

"And then, along the beach to Melancthe's villa?"

"Surprisingly, no. The shybalt might have become aware of Rylf. At Ys it

darted down to a flambeau on the square, where it joined a thousand other moths, all careening around the flame, to Rylf's confusion. He remained on watch, hoping to identify the moth he had followed from Swer Smod. As he waited, considering the swirling myriad, one of the moths dropped to the ground and altered its form to that of a human man. Rylf had no way of knowing whether this was the moth he had been following, or a totally different insect. By the laws of probability, as Rylf reckoned them, the moth of his interest remained in the throng; therefore Rylf took no special note of the man, although he was still able to provide a detailed description."

"That is all to the good, certainly."

"Just so. The man was of average quality, clad in ordinary garments, wearing a proper hat and shod with the usual sort of shoes. Rylf also noticed that he took himself to the largest of the nearby inns, beneath the sign of the setting sun."

"That would be the Sunset Inn, on the harbour."

"Rylf continued to keep watch on the moths, among them-according to the probabilities, as he calculated them-was the moth he had followed from Swer

Smód. At midnight the flambeau burned out, and the moths flew off in all directions. Rylf decided that he had done his best and returned to Swer Smód."

"Hmf," said Shimrod. "And now I am to try my luck at the Sunset Inn?"

"That is my suggestion."

Shimrod reflected. "It cannot be coincidence that Melancthe is also resident close by Ys."

"That is for you to verify. I have made inquiry and I learn that we are dealing with the shybalt Zagzig, who lacks good repute even on Xabiste."



"And when I find him?"

"Your task becomes delicate and even dangerous, since we will wish to question him with meticulous precision. He will ignore your orders, and attempt a sly trick of some kind; you must drop this circlet of suheil over his neck; otherwise he will kill you with a gust from his mouth."

Shimrod dubiously examined the ring of fine wire which Murgan had placed upon the table. "This ring will subdue Zagzig and make him passive?"

"Exactly so. You can then bring him back to Swer Smod, where our inquiries

can be made at leisure."

"And if he proves obstreperous?"

Murgen went to the mantelpiece and returned with a shortsword in a scabbard of worn black leather. "This is the sword Tace. Use it for your protection, though I prefer that you bring Zagzig submissively to Swer Smod. Come now into the tire room; we must arrange a guise for you. It is not fitting that you should be identified as Shimrod the Magician. If we must violate our own edict, at least let us do it by stealth."

Shimrod rose to his feet. "Remember to

counsel Vus and Vuwas, so that they extend me a more civilized welcome upon my return."

Murgen brushed aside the complaint. "First things first. At the moment, Zagzig must be your only concern."

"As you say."

### III

The River Evander, where it met the Atlantic Ocean, passed by a city of great antiquity, known to the poets of Wales, Ireland, Dahaut, Armorica and elsewhere as 'Ys the Beautiful', and 'Ys of the Hundred Palaces', and 'Ys of the

Ocean': a city so romantic, grand and rich that all subsequently claimed it for their own.

Still and all, Ys was not a city of great ostentation, nor magnificent temples, nor public occasions of any kind; Ys, indeed, was steeped in mysteries, old and new. The single concession the folk of Ys made to prideful display were the statues of mythical heroes ranked around the four Consancts, at the back of the central plaza. The inhabitants, in the language spoken nowhere else, called themselves 'Yssei': folk of Ys. By tradition they had come to the Elder Isles in four companies; over the course of history the companies had maintained

their identities, to be come, in effect, four secret societies, with functions and rites more fiercely guarded than life itself. For this reason, and others, the society was controlled by intricate customs and delicate etiquette, subtle beyond the understanding of alien folk.

The wealth of Ys and its people was proverbial, and derived from its function as a depot of trade and trans-shipment between the known world and far places to the south and west. Along the Evander and up the slopes to either side the Yessei palaces gleamed white through the foliage of the old gardens. Twelve arched bridges spanned the river; avenues paved with granite flags

followed each bank; with tow-paths skirting the shore, that barges laden with fruits, flowers, produce of all kinds, might be conveyed to the folk living at a distance from the central market. The largest structures of Ys were the four Consancts at the back of the plaza, where the factors of the four septs transacted their business.

The waterfront was considered a separate community by the folk of Ys; they called it 'Abri', or 'Place of Outlanders'. In the harbour district were the shops of small merchants, chandleries, foundries and forges, shipyards, sail-makers' lofts, rope-walks, warehouses, taverns and inns.

Of these inns, one of the largest and best was the Sunset Inn, identified by a sign showing a red sun sinking into an ultramarine ocean, with yellow clouds drifting above. In front of the Sunset Inn tables and benches served the convenience of those who might wish to take food or drink in the open air, while observing events in the square. Beside the door, sardines grilled over glowing coals, emitting a delectable odor and attracting customers who might otherwise have passed by unheeding.

Late in the afternoon Shimrod, in the guise of an itinerant man-at-arms, arrived at Ys. He had darkened his skin and his hair was now black, while a

simple cantrap of eighteen syllables had altered his features, causing him to appear hard-bitten, crafty and saturnine. At his side hung the shortsword Tace and a dagger: weapons adequate to the image he wished to project. He went directly to the Sunset Inn where, as it might seem from Rylf's report, Zagzig the shybalt had gone to keep a rendezvous. As Shimrod approached, the odor of grilling sardines reminded him that he had not eaten since morning.

Shimrod passed through the doorway and into the common room, where he halted to take stock of the company. Which of these persons, if any, would be the shybalt from Xabiste? None sat



brooding alone in a corner; none hunched watchfully with hooded eyes over a goblet of wine.

Shimrod went to the service counter. Here stood the inn keeper-a person short and plump, with cautious black eyes in a round red face. He nodded his head politely. "Your needs, sir?"

"First, I want accommodation for a day or so," said Shimrod. "I prefer a quiet chamber and a bed free of vermin. Then I will take my supper."

The innkeeper wiped his hands on his apron, meanwhile taking note of Shimrod's well-worn garments. "Such

arrangements can be made, and no doubt to your satisfaction. But first: a detail. Over the years I have been robbed right and left, up and down, by ruthless scoundrels, until at last my natural generosity became sour and now I am excessively provident. In short, I wish to see the color of your money before taking the transaction any farther."

Shimrod tossed a silver form upon the counter. "My stay may be of several days. This coin, of good silver, should adequately cover my expenses."

"It will at least open your account," said the innkeeper. "As it happens, a chamber of the type you require is ready for

occupancy. What name shall I write into my general register?"

"You may know me as 'Tace'," said Shimrod.

"Very well, Sir Tace. The boy will show you to your chamber. Fonsel! At once! Show Sir Tace to the large west chamber!"

"One moment," said Shimrod. "I wonder if a friend of mine arrived at about this time yesterday, or perhaps a bit later. I am not sure as to what name he might be using."

"Several visitors came yesterday," said

the innkeeper. "What is your friend's appearance?"

"He is of average description. He wears garments, covers his head with a hat and is shod with shoes."

The innkeeper reflected. "I cannot recall this gentleman. Sir Fulk of Thwist came at noon; he is grossly corpulent, and a large wen protrudes from his nose. A certain Janglart arrived during the afternoon, but he is tall and thin as a switch, very pale and a long white beard hangs from his chin. Mynax the sheepdealer is average in quality, but I have never known him to wear a hat: always he uses a cylindrical sheepskin

casque. No one else took rooms for the night."

"No great matter," said Shimrod. It was probable, he thought, that the shybalt had perched the long night through on a high gable rather than enduring the confinement of a room. "My friend will arrive in due course."

Shimrod followed Fonsel upstairs to the chamber, which he found satisfactory. Returning downstairs, he went out to the front of the inn and seated himself at a table, where he took his supper: first, a dozen sardines sizzling and crackling from the grill, next a platter of broad-beans and bacon with an onion for

relish, along with a hunch of new bread and a quart of ale.

The sun sank into the sea. Patrons entered and left the inn; none aroused Shimrod's suspicions. The shybalt might well have done its work and departed, thought Shimrod. His attention must then inevitably focus upon Melancthe, who lived in a white villa less than a mile up the beach and who had previously acted at the behest of Tamurello, for reasons never made clear to Shimrod.

Apparently, he had never been her lover, having preferred her sibling Faude Carfilhiot. The relationship might or might not have pleased Desmei-had she been alive and aware. It was, Shimrod

reflected, truly a tangled skein of barely plausible possibilities and shocking realities. Melancthe's role, rather than having been clarified by events, was as ambiguous now as ever, and probably not even known to herself. Who had ever plumbed even the most superficial level of Melancthe's consciousness? Certainly not himself.

Twilight descended upon Ys of the Ocean. Shimrod rose from his table and set off along the harbour road, which after leaving the docks struck off to the north beside the white beach.

The town fell behind. Tonight the wind was gone from the sky and the sea was

calm. Listless surf rolled up the beach, creating a dull soothing sound.

Shimrod approached the white villa. A chest-high wall of whitewashed stone enclosed a garden of asphodel, heliotrope, thyme, three slim cypresses and a pair of lemon trees.

The villa and its garden were well known to Shimrod. He had seen them first in a dream, which recurred night after night. In these dreams, Melancthe had first appeared to him, a dark-haired maiden of heart-wrenching beauty and contradictions beyond number.

On this particular evening Melancthe



seemed not at home. Shimrod walked through the garden, crossed the little strip of tiled terrace, rapped at the door. He awoke no response, not even from the maid. From within came no glow of lamps or candle. Nothing could be heard but the slow thud of the surf.

Shimrod left the villa and returned down the beach to the town square and the Sunset Inn. In the common room, he found an inconspicuous table beside the wall and seated himself.

One by one, Shimrod scrutinized the occupants of the room. In the main, they seemed local folk: tradesmen, artisans, a few peasants from the surrounding

countryside, a few seamen from ships in the harbour. None were Yssei, who kept themselves apart from the ruck of the townspeople.

A person sitting solitary a few tables away attracted Shimrod's attention. He appeared stocky of physique, but of middle stature. His garments were ordinary: a peasant's smock of coarse gray weave, loose breeches, buskins with pointed curled-over toes and triangular ankle-tabs. Pulled down upon his shock of brown hair was a narrow-brimmed black hat with a tall back-sloping crown. His face was bland and still, enlivened only by the glitter and constant shift of his small black eyes. On

the table before him rested a full mug of ale, which he had not tasted. His posture was stiff and queer: his chest moved neither in nor out. By these and other signs, Shimrod knew that here sat Zagzig the shybalt from Xabiste, uncomfortably disguised as a denizen of Earth. Shimrod noticed that Zagzig had carelessly failed to divest himself of the moth's middle two legs, which jerked and stirred from time to time under the gray blouse. The nape of Zagzig's neck also glistened with moth-scale, where he had failed to provide himself a proper integument of human skin.

Shimrod decided that, as usual, the simplest of available options was the

best: he would wait and watch and discover what eventuated.

Fonsel the serving boy, passing close to Zagzig with a tray, by chance jostled Zagzig's tall-crowned black hat, knocking it to the table, to reveal not only Zagzig's mat of brown hair but also a pair of feathery antennae which Zagzig had forgotten to remove. Fonsel stared with mouth agape, while Zagzig angrily clapped the hat back upon his head. He uttered a terse command; Fonsel grimaced, bobbed his head and hurried away with only a confused glance back over his shoulder. Zagzig darted glances this way and that to see who might have noticed the incident. Shimrod quickly

averted his eyes and pretended an interest in a rack of old blue plates hanging on the wall. Zagzig relaxed, and sat as before.

Ten minutes passed. The door was pushed ajar; in the door way stood a tall man in black garments. He was spare, broad-shouldered, taut and precise of movement, with a pallid complexion and black hair cut square across his forehead and tied in a rope at the back of his head. Shimrod studied the newcomer with interest; here, he thought, was a man of quick and ruthless intelligence. A scar across the gaunt cheek accentuated the menace of his already grim visage. From the evidence of his hair, his pallor and

his manner of contemptuous self sufficiency, Shimrod assumed the newcomer to be a Ska<sup>9</sup>, from Skaghane, or the Ska foreshore.

The Ska looked around the room. He glanced first at Shimrod, then at Zagzig, then once again around the room, after which he chose a table and seated himself. Fonsel came at a run to inquire his needs, and brought him ale, sardines and bread, almost before the order had been placed.

The Ska ate and drank without haste; when he had finished, he sat back in his chair and once again appraised first Shimrod, then Zagzig. Now he placed on

the table a ball of dark green serpentine, an inch in diameter, attached to a chain of fine iron links. Shimrod had seen such baubles before; they were caste-markers worn by Ska patricians.

At the sight of the talisman, Zagzig rose to his feet and crossed to the Ska's table.

Shimrod signalled Fonsel to his own table. Shimrod asked quietly: "Do not turn your head to look, but tell me the name of that tall Ska sitting yonder."

"I can make no sure assertion," said Fonsel. "I have never seen him before. However, across the room, I heard someone, in very confidential tones, use

the name 'Torqual'. If this is the Torqual of evil reputation, he is bold indeed to show his face here where King Aillas would be grateful to find him and stretch his neck."

Shimrod gave the boy a copper penny. "Your remarks are interesting. Bring me now a goblet of good tawny wine."

By a sleight of magic Shimrod augmented the acuity of his hearing so that the whispers of two young lovers in a far corner were now clearly audible, as were the innkeeper's instructions to Fonsel in regard to the watering of Shimrod's wine. However, the conversation between Zagzig and



Torqual had been muted by a magic as sharp as his own, and he could hear nothing of its content.

Fonsel served him a goblet of wine with a fine flourish. "Here you are, sir! Our noblest vintage!"

"That is good to hear," said Shimrod. "I am the official inspector of hostelries, by the authority of King Aillas. Still-would you believe it? I am often served poor stuff! Three days ago in Mynault, an innkeeper and his pot-boy conspired to water my wine, which act King Aillas has declared an offense against humanity."

"Truly, sir?" quavered Fonsel. "What then?"

"The constables took both innkeeper and the pot-boy to the public square and tied them to a post, where they were roundly flogged. They will not soon repeat their offense."

Fonsel snatched up the goblet. "Suddenly I see that, by mistake, I have poured from the wrong flask! One moment, sir, while I put matters right."

Fonsel, in haste, served a fresh goblet of wine, and a moment later the innkeeper himself came to the table, wiping his hands anxiously on his apron. "I trust that

all is in order, sir?"

"At the moment, yes."

"Good! Fonsel is sometimes a bit careless, and brings our good name into disrepute. Tonight I will beat him for his mistake."

Shimrod uttered a grim laugh. "Sir, leave poor Fonsel be. He thought better of his mischief, and deserves a chance at redemption."

The innkeeper bowed. "Sir, I will ponder your advice with care." He hurried back to the counter, and Shimrod resumed his observation of Zagzig the

shybalt and Torqual the Ska.

The conversation came to an end. Zagzig tossed a purse upon the table. Torqual loosened the drawstring and peered at the contents. He raised his eyes and treated Zagzig to a stony stare of displeasure. Zagzig returned an indifferent glance, then rose to his feet and prepared to depart the inn.

Shimrod, anticipating Zagzig's move, had preceded him, and waited in the front yard. The full moon had risen to illuminate the square; the granite flags showed almost as white as bone. Shimrod sidled into the deep shade of the hemlock which grew beside the inn.

Zagzig's silhouette appeared in the doorway; Shimrod readied the loop of suheil wire which he had received from Murgan.

Zagzig moved past; Shimrod stepped from the shade and attempted to drop the loop over Zagzig's head. The tall black hat interfered. Zagzig jerked aside; the suheil wire scraped his face and caused him to whine in shock. He spun around to face Shimrod. "Villain!" hissed Zagzig. "Do you think so to halter me? Your time has come." He opened wide his mouth, in order to expel a gust of poison. Shimrod thrust the sword Tace into the aperture; Zagzig uttered a groan and collapsed upon the moonlit

pavement, to become a pile of green sparks and flashes, which Shimrod fastidiously avoided. Presently nothing remained but a gray fluff so light that it drifted away on a cool air from the sea.

Shimrod returned into the common room. A young man dressed in the mode currently popular in Aquitaine had perched himself on a high stool with his lute. Striking chords and melodic passages, he sang ballads celebrating the deeds of lovelorn knights and yearning maidens, all in the mournful cadences imposed upon him by the tuning of his lute. Of Torqual there was no sign; he had departed the common room.

Shimrod summoned Fonsel, who sprang to his service on the instant. "Your wishes, sir?"

"The person named Torqual: is he lodged here at the Sunset Inn?"

"No, Your Honour! He left only a moment ago by the side door. May I bring your lordship more wine?"

Shimrod made a stately affirmative sign. "Needless to say, I thirst for no water."

"That, sir, goes without saying!"

Shimrod sat for an hour drinking wine and listening to the sad ballads of

Aquitaine. At last he became restless and went out into the night, where the moon now floated halfway up the sky. The square was empty; the stone flags glimmered white as before. Shimrod strolled to the harbour and along the esplanade to where it joined the shore road. Here he halted and looked up the beach. After a few minutes he turned away. At this time of night Melancthe would not be likely to receive him graciously.

Shimrod returned to the inn. The Aquitanian jongleur had departed, along with most of the patrons. Torqual was nowhere to be seen. Shimrod went up to his chamber, and composed himself to



rest.

## IV

In the morning Shimrod took his breakfast at the front of the inn, where he could look out across the square. He consumed a pear, a bowl of porridge with cream, several rashers of fried bacon, a slice of dark bread with cheese and pickled plums. The warmth of the sunlight was pleasantly in contrast to cool airs from the sea; Shimrod breakfasted without haste, watchful yet relaxed. Today was marketday; a confusion of movement, sound and color enlivened the square. Everywhere

merchants had set up tables and booths, from which they cried out the quality of their wares. Fishmongers held aloft their best fish and beat on iron triangles so that all might turn to look. Among the booths swirled the customers, for the most part housewives and servant girls, chaffering, haggling, weighing, judging, criticizing, occasionally clinking down their coins.

Other folk, as well, moved across the square: a quartet of melancholy priests from the Temple of Atlante; mariners and traders from far lands; an occasional Yssei factor on his way to inspect a cargo; a baron and his lady down from their dour mountain keep; herdsman and

crofters from the moors and glens of the Teach tac Teach.

Shimrod finished his breakfast but remained at the table eating grapes, wondering how best to proceed with his investigation. Even as Shimrod pondered, he noticed a dark-haired young woman marching across the square, her orange-brown skirt and a rose-pink blouse glowing in the sunlight. Shimrod recognized her for Melancthe's housemaid. She carried a pair of empty baskets and was evidently on her way to market.

Shimrod jumped to his feet and followed the young woman across the square. At a

fruit-vendor's booth she began to select oranges from the display. Shimrod watched a moment, then approached and touched her elbow. She looked around with a blank expression, failing to recognize Shimrod in his present guise.

"Come aside with me a moment," said Shimrod. "I want a few words with you."

The maid hesitated and drew away. Shimrod said: "My business is in connection with your mistress. No harm will come to you."

Puzzled and reluctant, the maid followed

Shimrod a few steps out into the square.  
"What do you want of me?"

Shimrod spoke in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. "I do not remember your name-if, indeed, I ever knew it."

"I am Lillas. Why should you know me? I have no recollection of you."

"Some time ago I called upon your mistress. You opened the door for me. Surely you remember?"

Lillas searched Shimrod's face. "You seem somehow familiar, though, in truth, I cannot place you exactly. The occasion must have been long ago."

"So it was, but you are still in the service of Melancthe?"

"Yes. I have no fault to find with her-at least none that would prompt me to leave her."

"She is an easy mistress?"

Lillas smiled sadly. "She hardly notices whether I am here or there, whether I am in the house or gone. Still, she would not want me to stand here gossiping about her affairs."

Shimrod produced a silver form. "What you tell me will travel no farther, and cannot be considered gossip."

Lillas dubiously took the coin. "For a fact, I am concerned for the lady. I understand no single phase of her conduct. Often she sits for hours looking out to sea. I go about my work and she pays me no heed, as if I were invisible."

"Does she often receive visitors?"

"Seldom. Still, just this morning-" Lillas hesitated, and looked over her shoulder.

Shimrod prompted her. "Who was her visitor this morning?"

"He came early-a tall pale man with a scar on his face; I think he would be a Ska. He knocked at the door; I opened to

him. He said: 'Tell your mistress that Torqual is here.'"

"I drew back and he came into the hall. I went to Lady Me lancthe and gave her the message."

"Was she surprised?"

"I think she was perplexed and not well-pleased, but perhaps not altogether astonished. She hesitated only a moment, then went out into the hall. I followed, but remained behind the curtain, where I could watch through the crack. The two stood looking at each other a moment, then Torqual said: 'I am told that I must obey your commands. What do you know



of this arrangement?"

"The Lady Melancthe said: 'I am not sure of anything.'"

"Torqual asked: 'Did you not expect me?'"

'An intimation came-but nothing is clear and I must ponder,' said my lady. 'Go now! If I find commands for you, I will let you know.'

"At this Torqual seemed amused. 'And how will you do this?'"

"By means of a signal. If I am prompted in this direction, a black urn will appear

on the wall by the gate. Should you see the black urn, then you may come again."

"At this, the man Torqual smiled, and bowed, so that he seemed almost princely. Without another word he turned and left the villa. That is what happened this morning. I am happy to tell you, since Torqual frightens me. Clearly he can bring the

Lady Melancthe only distress."

"Your fears are well-founded," said Shimrod. "Still, she may choose not to deal with Torqual."

"So it may be."

"She is now at home?"

"Yes; as usual she sits looking out to sea."

"I will call on her. Perhaps I can set matters straight." Lillas spoke anxiously: "You will not reveal that we have discussed her affairs?"

"Certainly not."

Lillas went back to the fruit-seller's booth; Shimrod crossed the square to the harbour road. His suspicions had been validated Melancthe's involvement in the affair might so far only be passive and might remain so, still Melancthe's

only sure trait was her unpredictability.

Shimrod looked to the north, toward the white villa. He could find no reason for delay, save his own reluctance to confront Melancthe. He set off to the north along the beach road, walking with long deliberate strides, and soon arrived at the white stone wall. No black urn, so he noted, was visible.

Shimrod crossed the garden, went to the door. He raised the knocker and let it fall.

There was no response.

Shimrod knocked a second time, with the

same result as before.

The villa, so it seemed, was empty of its occupants. Shimrod turned slowly away from the door, then went to stand by the side of the gate. He looked up the road to the north. In the near distance he discovered Melanthe, approaching without haste. He felt no surprise; so it had been in his dreams.

Shimrod waited, with the sunlight glaring down upon the sand of the road. Melanthe drew near: a slender dark-haired maiden wearing a white knee-length frock and sandals. With only a brief impassive stare for Shimrod, she turned through the gate; as she passed,

Shimrod sensed the faint odor of violets which always accompanied her.

Melancthe went to the door. Shimrod followed soberly and entered the villa behind her. She went along the hall and into a long room with a wide arched window overlooking the sea. Moving to the window, Melancthe stood gazing pensively toward the horizon. Shimrod stood in the doorway, looking here and there, appraising the room. Little had changed since his last visit. The walls were washed white; on the tiled floor three rugs showed bold patterns of orange, red, black, white and green. A table, a few heavy chairs, a divan and a sideboard were the only furnishings. The

walls were innocent of decoration; nowhere in the room were objects to indicate Melancthe's point of view or to suggest the bent of her personality. The rugs were vivid and vital, and would seem to be imports from the Atlas Mountains; almost certainly, so Shimrod surmised, they had been purchased and laid down by Lillas the maid, with Melancthe taking no particular notice.

Melancthe at last turned to Shimrod, and showed him a curious twisted smile. "Speak, Shimrod! Why are you here?"

"You recognize me, despite my disguise?"

Melancthe seemed taken aback. " 'Disguise'? I notice no disguise. You are Shimrod, as meek, quixotic and indecisive as ever."

"No doubt," said Shimrod. "So much for my disguise; I cannot conceal my identity. Have you decided upon an identity for Melancthe?"

Melancthe made an airy gesture. "Such talk is beside the mark. What is your business with me? I doubt that you have come to analyze my character."

Shimrod pointed to the divan. "Let us sit; it is dreary work talking on both feet."



Melancthe gave an indifferent shrug and dropped down upon the divan; Shimrod seated himself beside her. "You are as beautiful as ever."

"So I am told."

"At our last meeting you had developed a taste for poisonous blossoms. Is this inclination still with you?"

Melancthe shook her head. "There are no more such blossoms to be found. I think of them often; they were wonderfully appealing; do you not agree?"

"They were fascinating, if vile," said Shimrod.

"I did not find them so. The colors were of great variety, and the scents were unusual."

"Still-you must believe me!-they represented the aspects of evil: the many flavors of purulence, so to speak."

Melancthe smiled and shook her head. "I cannot understand these tedious abstractions, and I doubt if the effort would yield any amusement, since I am easily bored."

"As a matter of interest, do you know the meaning of the word 'evil'?"

"It seems to mean what you intend it to

mean."

"The word is general. Do you know the difference between, let us say, kindness and cruelty?"

"I have never thought to notice. Why do you ask?"

"Because, for a fact, I have come to study your character."

"Again? For what reason?"

"I am curious to discover whether you are 'good' or 'bad'." Melancthe shrugged.

"That is as if I were to ask whether you were a bird or a fish-and then expect an

earnest answer."

Shimrod sighed. "Just so. How goes your life?"

"I prefer it to oblivion."

"How do you occupy yourself each day?"

"I watch the sea and the sky; sometimes I wade in the surf and build roads in the sand. At night I study the stars."

"You have no friends?"

"No."

"And what of the future?"

"The future stops at Now."

"As to that, I am not so sure," said Shimrod. "It is at best a half-truth."

"What of that? Half a truth is better than none: do you not agree?"

"Not altogether," said Shimrod. "I am a practical man, I try to control the shape of the 'nows' which lie in the offing, instead of submitting to them as they occur."

Melanthe gave an uninterested shrug. "You are free to do as you like." Leaning back into the cushions, she looked out across the sea.

Shimrod finally spoke. "Well then: are you 'good' or 'bad'?"

"I don't know."

Shimrod became vexed. "Talking with you is like visiting an empty house."

Melancthe considered a moment before responding. "Perhaps," she said, "you are visiting the wrong house. Or perhaps you are the wrong visitor."

"Ha hah!" said Shimrod. "You seem to be telling me that indeed, you are capable of thought."

"I think constantly, day and night."

"What thoughts do you think?"

"You would not understand them."

"Do your thoughts bring you pleasure?  
Or peace?"

"As always, you ask questions I cannot  
answer."

"They seem simple enough."

"For you, no doubt. As for me, I was  
brought naked and empty into the world;  
it was only required that I imitate  
humanity, not that I should become  
human. I do not know what sort of  
creature I am. This is the subject of my

reflections. They are complicated. Since I know no human emotions, I have contrived an entire new compendium, which only I can feel."

"That is very interesting! When do you use these new emotions?"

"I use them continually. Some are heavy, others are light, and are named for clouds. Some are constant; others are fugitive. Sometimes they come to thrill me and I would like to keep them forever-just as I longed to keep the wonderful flowers! But the moods slip away before I can name them, and cherish them in my heart. Sometimes, often, they never come back, no matter



how I yearn."

"How do you name these emotions? Tell me!"

Melancthe shook her head. "The names would mean nothing. I have watched insects, wondering how they name their emotions and wondering if perhaps they were like mine."

"I should think not," said Shimrod.

Melancthe spoke on unheeding. "It may be that instead of emotion, I feel sensation only, which I think to be emotion. This is how an insect feels the moods of its life."

"In your new set of emotions, do you have equivalents for 'good' and 'bad'?"

"These are not emotions! You are trying to trick me into talking your language! Very well; I shall answer. I do not know what to think of myself. Since I am not human, I wonder what I am and how my life will go."

Shimrod sat back and reflected. "At one time you served Tamurello: why did you do so?"

"That was the behest built into my brain."

"Now he is pent in a bottle, but still you

are asked to serve him."

Melancthe frowned at Shimrod, mouth pursed in disapproval. "Why do you say so?"

"Murgen has informed me."

"And what does he know?"

"Enough to ask stern questions. How do these orders come to you?"

"I have had no exact orders, only impulses and intimations."

"Who prompts them?"

"Sometimes I think that they are my own

contriving. When these moods come on me, I am exalted and I am fully alive!"

"Someone is rewarding you for your cooperation. You must be careful!

Tamurello sits in a glass bottle, nose between his knees. Do you want the same for yourself?"

"It will not happen so."

"Is that how Desmei has instructed you?"

"Please do not utter that name."

"It must be spoken, since it is another word for 'doom'. Your doom, if you allow her to use you as her instrument."

Melanthe rose to her feet and went to the window.

Shimrod spoke to her back: "Come with me once again to Trilda. I will purge you entirely of the green stench. We will thwart Desmei the witch. You will be wholly free and wholly alive."

Melanthe turned to face Shimrod. "I know nothing of any green stench, and nothing of Desmei. Go now."

Shimrod rose to his feet. "Today-think upon yourself and how you might want your life to go. I will return at sunset, and perhaps you will come away with me." Melanthe seemed not to hear.

Shimrod left the room and departed the villa.

The day passed, hour by hour. Shimrod sat at his table before the inn watching the sun cross the sky. When it hung its own diameter above the horizon he set off up the beach. Presently he arrived at the white villa. He went to the front door and raising the knocker, let it fall.

The door opened a crack. Lillas the maid looked out at him.

"Good evening," said Shimrod. "I want to speak with your mistress."

Lillas looked at him large-eyed. "She is

not here."

"Where is she? Up the beach?"

"She is gone."

" 'Gone'?" Shimrod spoke sharply.

"Gone where?"

"As to that, who can say?"

"What has happened to her?"

"An hour ago I answered to a knock at the door. It was Torqual the Ska. He walked past me, along the hall and into the parlour. The mistress was sitting on the divan; she jumped to her feet. The two looked at each other for a moment,

and I watched from the doorway. He spoke a single word: 'Come!' The mistress made no move, but stood as if irresolute. Torqual stepped forward, took her hand and led her away down the hall and out the front door. She made no protest; indeed, she walked like a person in a dream."

Shimrod listened with a weight pressing at the pit of his stomach. Lillas spoke on in a rush: "There were two horses in the road. Torqual lifted my mistress into the saddle of one and mounted the other. They rode away to the north. And now I do not know what to do!"

Shimrod found his voice. "Do as usual;



you have not been instructed otherwise."

"That is good advice!" said Lillas.

"Perhaps she will be home in short order."

"Perhaps."

Shimrod returned south along the beach road to the Sunset Inn. In the morning he took himself once again to the white villa, but found only Lillas on the premises. "You have had no word from your mistress?"

"No, sir. She is far away; I feel it in my bones."

"So do I." Shimrod reached to the ground for a pebble. He rubbed it between his fingers and handed it to Lillas. "As soon as your mistress returns, take this pebble out of doors, throw it into the air and say: 'Go to Shimrod!' Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"What will you do?"

"I will throw the pebble into the air and say: 'Go to Shimrod!'"

"That is correct! And here is a silver florin to assist your memory."

"Thank you, sir."

## V

Shimrod conveyed himself up over the mountains to the stony flat in front of Swer Smod. Entering the forecourt, he discovered the two gryphs sitting down to their morning meal, which included two great joints of beef, four roast fowl, a pair of suckling pigs, two trenchers of pickled salmon, a round of white cheese, and several loaves of new bread. At the sight of Shimrod they jumped up from the table in a rage and ran forward as if to rend him limb from limb.

Shimrod held up his hand. "Moderation, if you please! Has not Murgan instructed you to milder manners?"

"He approved our vigilance," said Vuwas. "He advised a trifle more restraint toward persons of patently good character."

"You do not fit that description," said Vus. "Hence we must do our duty."

"Stop! I am Shimrod, and I am here on legitimate business!"

"That remains to be seen!" said the mottled green Vus. With one claw he scratched a line across the stone

pavement. "First we must be convinced of your bona fides, which we will look into as soon as we dine."

"We have been hoodwinked before," said Vuwas. "Never again! Step one inch past that line and we will devour you for an appetizer."

Shimrod performed a small spell. "I would prefer to pass by your investigation at once, but no doubt you are anxious to join your guests."

" 'Guests'?" demanded Vuwas. "What guests are these?" Shimrod pointed; the gryphs turned to discover a troop of eight baboons wearing red trousers and

round red hats making free with their repast. Some stood at one side of the table, others opposite, while three stood on the table itself.

Vus and Vuwas roared in full outrage, and ran to chase off the baboons, but they were not so easily discouraged, and hopped with agility here and there, walking in the pickled salmon, and throwing food at the gryphs. Shimrod took advantage of the disturbance to cross the forecourt, and so arrived at the tall iron door. He was admitted and made his way to the great hall.

As before, a fire blazed in the fireplace. The glass globe hanging from the ceiling

glowed sullen green. Murgan was not in evidence. Shimrod seated himself beside the fire and waited. After a moment, he turned his head and glanced up at the suspended globe. Two black eyes glittered at him through the green murk. Shimrod turned his gaze back to the fire.

Murgan entered the room and joined Shimrod at the table. "You seem a bit dispirited," said Murgan. "How went events at Ys?"

"Well enough, in certain respects." Shimrod told of what had transpired at the Sunset Inn and at Melancthe's villa. "I learned little that we did not already suspect, except the fact of Torqual's

involvement."

"It is important and signifies a conspiracy! Remember, he first came to Melanthe to learn her commands."

"But on the second occasion he ignored her commands and forced her to his will."

"It is perhaps cynical to note that he did not need to force very hard."

Shimrod stared into the fire. "What do you know of Torqual?"

"Not a great deal. He was born a Ska nobleman who became a renegade, and



is now an outlaw living by plunder, blood and terror. His ambitions may well extend farther."

"Why do you say that?"

"Is that not implied by his conduct? King Casmir wants him to incite revolt among the Ulfish barons; Torqual takes Casmir's money and goes his own way, with no real advantage to Casmir. If Aillas loses control of the mountains, Torqual will hope to become the ruler, and who knows what then? North and South Ulfiand? Godelia? East Dahaut?"

"Luckily, it is an unlikely prospect."

Murgen stared into the fire. "Torqual is a man without mercy. It would be a pleasure to hang him in a bottle alongside Tamurello. Alas! I cannot violate my own law-unless he gives me cause. This cause may well be forthcoming."

"How so?"

"The propulsion to this affair, so I tell myself, can only be Desmei. Where has she taken herself? She is either using some unexpected semblance or hiding where she cannot be discovered. Her hopes flourish and fester! She has revenged herself sweetly upon Tamurello, but not upon the race of men;

she is not yet sated."

"Perhaps she lives passive inside Melanthe, waiting and watching."

Murgen shook his head. "She would be constricted and far too vulnerable, since I would know at once. On the other hand, Melanthe, or a construct just like her, may be the vessel Desmei ultimately plans to fill."

"Tragic that a thing so beautiful must be put too such humiliating uses!" said Shimrod. He sat back in his chair. "Still, it is nothing to me."

"Just so," said Murgen. "Now, for a

space I must put this matter aside. Other affairs press at my attention. The star Achernar is rife with odd activity, especially in the far outer tracts. Meanwhile Joald stirs in the depths. I must discover if a linkage exists."

"In that case, what of me?"

Murgen rubbed his chin. "I will set out a monitor. If Torqual uses magic we will interfere. If he is only a bandit, no matter how cruel, King Aillas and his armies must take him in charge."

"I would favor more direct action."

"No doubt; still our goal is minimal

involvement! The Edict is a fragile force, if we are discovered in violation its inhibition may dissolve into smoke."

"One last word! Your devils are as horrid as ever! They might well frighten a timid person. You must definitely teach them a more polite etiquette."

"I will see to it."

# CHAPTER SIX

## I

At the end of summer, with the smell of autumn in the air, the royal family departed Sarris for Castle Haidion. There was no unanimity of feeling regarding the event. King Casmir left the informal style of life at Sarris with reluctance. Queen Sollace, on the other hand, could hardly wait to put the rustic deficiencies of Sarris behind her. Cassander cared little one way or the other; boon companions, flirtatious maidens, merry entertainments were as accessible at Haidion as at Sarris;

perhaps more so. Princess Madouc, like King Casmir, departed Sarris with reluctance. She hinted to Lady Desdea, not once but several times, that conditions at Sarris suited her well, and that she would prefer not to return to Haidion at all. Lady Desdea paid no heed and Madouc's desires came to naught. Willy-filly, sullen and bored, Madouc was instructed into the royal carriage for the long ride back to Lyonesse Town. In a brave if hollow voice, Madouc stated her intention to ride Tyfer instead. She pointed out that everyone's convenience would thereby be served. Those riding in the carriage would enjoy more space, while Tyfer would benefit from the exercise. Lady

Desdea heard the proposal with eyebrows high in cold amazement. "That is impossible, of course! It would be considered conduct most boisterous; the act of a hoyden! The folk of the countryside would stare in wonder-those who did not laugh outright-to see you trotting so proudly through the dust!"

"I had no plans to ride in the dust! I would just as lief ride in the van, ahead of the dust."

"And what a sight you would be, leading the cavalcade on your intrepid steed Tyfer! I am surprised that you do not choose to wear mail and carry a banner on high, like a prodrome of old!"



"I had nothing like this in mind; I only-"

Lady Desdea held up her hand. "Say no more! For once you must conduct yourself with dignity, and ride properly with Her Majesty. Your maidens will be allowed to sit beside you in the carriage, for your amusement."

"That is why I want to ride Tyfer."

"Impossible."

So went the arrangements. Despite Madouc's dissatisfaction, the carriage departed Sarris with Madouc sitting across from Queen Sollace, with Devonet and Chlodys on the seat to her

left.

In due course the party arrived at Castle Haidion, and the ordinary routines of life were resumed. Madouc was housed as before in her old chambers, though suddenly they had become cramped and constricted, or so it seemed. "Odd!" thought Madouc. "In a single summer I have aged an entire era, and of course I have become far wiser. I wonder ..."

She put her hands to her chest, to feel two small pads of softness she had not previously noticed. She felt them again. They were definite.

"Hm," said Madouc. "I hope I do not grow to look like Chlodys."

The autumn passed, and then the winter. For Madouc the most noteworthy event was the retirement of Lady Desdea, on the plea of backache, nervous cramp and general malaise. Spiteful tongues whispered that Madouc's perverse antics and general intractability had at last conquered Lady Desdea and had made her ill. Indeed, during the late winter, Lady Desdea turned lemon-yellow, began to swell in the middle, and presently died of the dropsy.

Her successor was a noblewoman younger and more flexible: Lady Lavelle, third daughter to the Duke of Wysceog. Lady Lavelle, having taken note of past attempts to educate the

obstreperous princess, changed tactics and dealt casually with Madouc. She took for granted-at least ostensibly-that Madouc, keen to her own advantage, would wish to learn the tricks, ploys and stratagems that would allow her to negotiate court protocol with the least inconvenience. Of course, as a prerequisite, Madouc must learn the conventions which she would be learning to avoid. So, despite herself and half-aware of Lady Lavelle's tactics, Madouc assimilated a smattering of court procedure and certain pretty little skills of genteel coquetry.

A series of storms brought howling winds and driving rains to Lyonesse

Town, and Madouc was pent inside Haidion. After a month the storm abated, and the town was washed in a sudden flood of pale sunlight. After such long confinement Madouc felt impelled to go out and wander in the open air. With no better destination at hand, she decided to revisit the hidden garden where Suldrun had pined away her life.

Assuring herself that she went unseen Madouc hastened up the cloistered walk. Through the tunnel in Zoltra Bright-Star's Wall, then the rotting old portal, Madouc stepped into the garden. At the top of the vale she stopped to look and listen. She saw no living creature and heard no sound save the far muffled rush of the

surf. Odd! thought Madouc. In the wan winter sunlight the garden seemed less melancholy than as she remembered it.

Madouc wandered down the trail to the beach. The surf, driven by the storms, reared high to crash heavily down upon the shingle. Madouc turned away to look up the vale. Suidrun's conduct seemed more incomprehensible than ever.

According to Cassander she could not bring herself to face the dangers and hardships of life on the road. But what then? For a clever person, determined to survive, the dangers could be minimized and perhaps avoided. But Suldrun, timid and apathetic, had preferred to languish in the hidden garden and so at last she

had died.

"As for me," Madouc told herself, "I would have been over the fence in a trice! After that, I would pretend to be a boy and also a leper. I would feign sores on my face, to disgust anyone who came near me, and those who were not disgusted, I would stab with a knife! Had I been Suldrun, I would be alive today!"

Madouc soberly started up the path. There were lessons to be learned from those tragic events of the past. First, Suldrun had hoped for King Casmir's mercy, which had not been forthcoming. The significance was clear. A princess

of Lyonesse must marry as Casmir desired or else incur his merciless displeasure. Madouc grimaced. The correspondence between Suldrun's case and her own was much too close for comfort. Still, displeasure or not, King Casmir must be persuaded not to involve her in his schemes of empire.

Madouc left the garden, and returned down the way to the castle. Out over the Lir a bank of black clouds was approaching fast, and even as Madouc approached the castle, a damp gust of wind struck at her, whipping the skirt around her legs. The day grew dark and the new storm arrived with thunder, lightning and rain. Madouc wondered if



winter would ever end.

A week passed and another, and at last the sun drove shafts of light down through the clouds. The next day dawned sparkling clear. King Casmir, himself oppressed by the bad weather, decided to take the air with Queen Sollace, and in the process show themselves to the folk of Lyonesse Town. He ordered out the 'ceremonial carriage, which presently pulled up in front of the castle. The royal family took their places: King Casmir and Queen Sollace facing forward; Prince Cassander and Princess Madouc stiffly opposite.

The procession set off: a herald holding

high the royal arms, consisting of a black Tree of Life on a white field, with a dozen scarlet pomegranates hanging from the branches. Next rode three men-at-arms in chain corselets and iron helmets, holding halberds high, followed by the open carriage with its royal cargo. Another three men-at-arms, riding abreast, brought up the rear.

The procession moved down the Sfer Arct-slowly, so that the townspeople might rush out to stare and point and raise an occasional cheer. At the foot of the Sfer Arct, the procession turned to the right and continued around the Chale to the site of the new cathedral. Here the carriage halted and the royal party

alighted, so that they might inspect the progress of construction. Almost at once they were approached by Father Umphred. The meeting was not accidental. Father Umphred and Queen Sollace had calculated at length how best to engage King Cas mir's interest in the cathedral. Father Umphred, in pursuance of their plans, now bustled importantly forward and proposed a tour of the half-finished construction.

King Casmir gave him a curt response. "I can see well enough from here."

"As Your Majesty desires! Still, the full scope of Sollace Sanctissima might be more pleausurably apparent upon closer

view."

King Casmir glanced across the site.

"Your sect is not numerous. The structure is far too large for its purpose."

"We earnestly believe to the contrary," said Father Umphred cheerfully. "In any event, is not magnificence and grandeur more suitable for the Sollace Sanctissima than some makeshift little chapel of sticks and mud?"

"I am impressed by neither one nor the other," said King Casmir. "I have heard that in Rome and Ravenna the churches are crammed so full with gold ornaments and jeweled gewgaws that they lack

space for aught else. Be assured that never a penny from the Royal Exchequer of Lyonesse will be spent on such bedizenry."

Father Umphred forced a laugh. "Your Majesty, I submit that the cathedral will enrich the city, rather than the reverse. By this same token, a splendid cathedral will do the same, only faster." Father Umphred gave a delicate cough. "You must remember that at Rome and Ravenna the gold came not from those who built the cathedrals but those who came to worship."

"Ha!" King Casmir was interested despite his prejudices. "And how is this

miracle accomplished?"

"There is no mystery. The worshippers hope to attract the favorable attention of Divinity by making a financial contribution." Father Umphred turned out his hands. "Who knows? The belief may be well-founded! No one has proved otherwise."

"Hmf."

"One thing is certain! Every pilgrim arriving at Lyonesse Town will depart enriched in spirit, though poorer in worldly goods."

King Casmir appraised the unfinished

cathedral as if with a new vision. "How do you hope to attract wealthy and munificent pilgrims?"

"Some will come to worship and to participate in the rites. Others will sit in the hush of the great nave for hours, as if steeping themselves in a holy suffusion. Others will come to marvel at our relics, to feel the awe of their presence. These relics are of signal importance, and attract pilgrims from far and wide with great efficacy."

'Relics'? What relics are these? To my knowledge we have none."

"It is an interesting subject," said Father

Umphred. "Relics are of many sorts, and might be classified into several categories. The first and most precious are those directly associated with the Lord Jesus Christ. In the second rank and very excellent we find objects associated with one or another of the Holy Apostles. In the third rank, often most precious and most rare, are relics from antiquity: for instance, the stone with which David slew Goliath, or one of Shadrach's sandals, with scorch-marks on the sole. In the fourth rank, and still very fine, are objects associated with one or another of the saints. There are also what I shall call incidental relics, interesting because of association rather than holy essence. For instance, a



claw of the bear which devoured Saint Candolphus, or a bangle from the arm of the prostitute Jesus defended before the temple, or a desiccated ear from one of the Gadarene swine. Unfortunately, many of the best and most wonderful relics have vanished, or were never collected. On the other hand, articles of guaranteed quality sometimes appear and are even offered for sale. One must take care, of course, when making such purchases."

King Casmir pulled at his beard. "How can you know that any of the relics are genuine?"

Father Umphred pursed his lips. "If a false item were placed in sanctified

surroundings, a divine lightning-bolt would strike down to destroy the factitious article and also the perpetrator of the hoax, or so I have been told. Further, the debased heretic would languish forever in the deepest pits of Hell! This is well known and is our safeguard and our surety!"

"Hmmf. Does this divine lightning-bolt descend often?"

"I have no knowledge as to the number of such cases."

"So how do you propose to acquire your relics?"

"By various means. Some will come as gifts; we will dispatch agents to seek out others. The most cherished relic of all is the Holy Grail, which the Saviour used at his Last Supper, and which also was used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood from the divine wounds. Later he brought it to Glastonbury Abbey in Britain; thence it was taken to a sacred island on Lough I Corrib in Ireland. Thence it was brought to the Elder Isles to preserve it safe from the pagans, but its present whereabouts is unknown."

"That is an interesting tale," said King Casmir. "You would be well-advised to seek this 'Grail' for your display."

"We can only hope and dream! If the Grail came into our possession, we would instantly become the proudest church of Christendom."

Queen Sollace could not control a small cry of excitement. She turned her great moist eyes upon King Casmir. "My lord, is it not clear? We must have the best and most excellent relics; nothing else will suffice!"

King Casmir gave a stony shrug. "Do as you like, so long as you make no draft upon the royal exchequer. That is my unswerving resolve."

"But is it not clear? Any small sums paid

out now will be returned a hundred times over! And all will go for the greater glory of our wonderful cathedral!"

"Precisely so!" Father Umphred used his richest tones. "As always, dear lady, you have uttered the wise and incisive comment!"

"Let us go back to the carriage," said King Casmir. "I have seen all I care to see and heard rather more."

## II

The months of the year went their way and winter became spring. The period

was enlivened by a variety of events. Prince Cassander became involved in an untidy scandal and was sent off to Fort Mael, close under the Blaloc border, to cool his heels and to reflect upon his misdeeds.

From South Ulfand came news of Torqual. He had led out his band on a foray against the isolated and apparently undefended Framm Keep, only to encounter an ambush laid by troops of the Ulfish army. In the skirmish Torqual lost the greater part of his band and was lucky to have escaped with his life.

Another event, of moment to Madouc herself, was the betrothal of her

agreeable and apparently casual preceptress Lady Lavelle. Preparations for the wedding to Sir Garstang of Twanbow Hall necessitated her departure from Haidion and return to Pridart Place.

Madouc's new preceptress was Lady Vosse, spinster daughter to Casmir's second cousin Lord Vix of Wildmay Fourtower, near Slute Skeme. Unkind rumor suggested that Lady Vosse had been fathered by a vagabond Goth during one of Lord Vix's absences from Wildmay Fourtower; whatever the truth of the case, Lady Vosse in no way resembled her three younger sisters, who were slender, dark of hair, gentle of

disposition and sufficiently well-favored to attract husbands for themselves. Lady Vosse, in contrast, was tall, iron-gray of hair, heavy of bone, with a square granitic face, gray eyes staring from under iron-gray eyebrows and a disposition deficient in those easy casual qualities which had commended Lady Lavelle to Madouc.

Three days after the departure of Lady Lavelle, Queen Sollace summoned Madouc to her chambers. "Step forward, Madouc! This is Lady Vosse, who is to assume the duties which I fear were somewhat scamped by Lady Lavelle. Your instruction will henceforth be supervised by Lady Vosse."



Madouc glanced sidelong at Lady Vosse. "Please, Your Majesty, I feel that such supervision is no longer needed."

"I would be happy if it were so. In any case Lady Vosse will ensure that you are proficient in the proper categories. Like myself, she will be satisfied only with excellence, and you must dedicate all your energies to this end!"

Lady Vosse said: "Lady Lavelle, so I am told, was lax in her standards, and failed to drive home the exactitude of each lesson. The victim of such laxity, sadly enough, is Princess Madouc, who fell into the habit of frittering away her time."

Queen Sollace said: "I am pleased to hear these words of dedication! Madouc has never taken kindly to precision, or discipline. I am sure, Lady Vosse, that you will remedy this lack."

"I will do my best." Lady Vosse turned to Madouc. "Princess, I demand no miracles! You need only do your best!"

"Just so," said Queen Sollace. "Madouc, do you understand this new principle?"

Madouc said bravely: "Let me ask this. Am I the royal princess?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"In that case, Lady Vosse must obey my royal commands and teach me what I wish to learn."

"Ha hah!" said Queen Sollace. "Your arguments are valid to a certain point, but you are still too inexperienced to know what is best for you. Lady Vosse is most wise in this regard, and will direct your education."

"But Your Highness, if you please! This might be the wrong education! Must I learn to be like Lady Vosse!"

Lady Vosse spoke in a measured voice: "You will learn what I choose to teach! You will learn it well! And you will be

the better for it!"

Queen Sollace waved her hand. "That is all, Madouc. You may go. There is no more to be said on the subject."

Almost at once Madouc's conduct gave Lady Vosse cause for complaint. "I intend to waste neither time nor soft words with you. Let us have an understanding: either obey my instructions exactly and without quibble, or I shall go on the instant to Queen Sollace and ask her permission to beat you properly."

"That would be incorrect conduct," Madouc pointed out.

"It would happen in private and no one would know, save you and me. Further, no one would care-save you and me. I advise you: beware! The privilege may well be allowed to me, and I would welcome it, since your contumacity is as offensive as your smirking insolence!"

Madouc spoke primly: "These remarks are outrageous, and I forbid you to enter my presence again until you apologize! Also, I demand that you bathe more often, since you smell of goat, or something similar. You are dismissed for the day."

Lady Vosse stared at Madouc with a lax jaw. She turned on her heel and departed

the room. An hour later Madouc was summoned to the chambers of Queen Sollace, where she went slack-footed and heavy with foreboding. She found Queen Sollace sitting in an upholstered chair while Ermelgart brushed her hair. To one side stood Father Umphred, reading from a book of psalms. To the other side, silent and still on a bench, sat Lady Vosse.

Queen Sollace spoke in a peevish voice: "Madouc, I am displeased with you. Lady Vosse has described your insolence and your insubordination. Both would seem to be studied and deliberate! What have you to say for yourself?"

"Lady Vosse is not a nice person."

Queen Sollace gave an incredulous laugh. "Even were your opinion correct, what is the consequence, so long as she does her duty?"

Madouc essayed a cheerful rejoinder. "It is she who is guilty of insolence to me, a royal princess! She must apologize at this moment, or I will order her treated to a good whiking. Father Umphred may wield the whisk, for all of me, so long as he strikes strong, often and true to the mark."

"Tchah!" cried Lady Vosse in shock.  
"What nonsense the child does prattle! Is

she mad?"

Father Umphred could not restrain a fruity chuckle. Lady Vosse turned him an icy gray glance, and Father Umphred abruptly fell silent.

Queen Sollace spoke sternly: "Madouc, your wild talk has amazed us all! Remember! Lady Vosse acts in my stead; when you disobey her, you disobey me! Apparently you will not allow your hair to be properly coiffed nor will you abandon those rude garments which you are wearing at this instant. Faugh! They are suitable for a peasant boy, but not a dainty royal princess!"



"Agreed!" said Lady Vosse. "She is no longer a young child, but a budding maiden, and now must observe the proprieties."

Madouc blew out her cheeks. "I do not like my hair pulled up so high that my eyes bulge. As for my clothes, I wear what is sensible! Why wear a fine gown to the stables only to drag the hem in manure?"

Queen Sollace spoke sharply: "In that case, you must avoid the stables! Do you see me roistering about among the horses, or Lady Vosse sitting familiarly by the dungheap? Of course not! We observe the gentilities of rank and place!

As for your hair, Lady Vosse correctly wants to coif it in a fashionable style, and teach you courtly demeanour, so that the young gallants will not think you a freak when they meet you at a ball or a charade."

"They will not think me a freak, because I will not be present, either at ball or charade."

Queen Sollace stared fixedly at Madouc. "You will be on hand if you are so instructed. Soon there will be serious talk of betrothal, and you must appear to advantage. Always remember: you are Princess Madouc of Lyonesse and so you must seem."

"Precisely so!" said Madouc. "I am Princess Madouc, of high rank and authority! I have ordered a whisking for Lady Vosse. Let us see to it at this very moment!"

"Yes," said Queen Sollace grimly. "I shall see to it. Ermelgart, from the besom pluck me five long withes; let them be both stout and supple."

Ermelgart hastened to obey.

"Yes, these will do nicely," said Queen Sollace. "Now then, let us proceed to the whisking! Madouc! Come hither!"

"What for?"

Queen Sollace swished the whisk back and forth. "I am not keen for this sort of thing; it sets me in a sweat. Still, a task worth doing is worth doing well. Come hither, and remove your lower garments."

Madouc spoke in quavering tones: "I would feel foolish doing as you suggest. It is far more sensible to stand as far as possible from you and your whisk."

"Do you defy me?" bellowed Queen Sollace. She heaved herself to her feet. "I shall put this whisk to good use!" Throwing back her robe with a sweep of her heavy white arm, Sollace marched forward. Father Umphred, book of

psalms dangling from his fingers, stood beaming; Lady Vosse sat straight and stern. Madouc looked right and left in despair. Once again in justice seemed ascendant, with everyone eager to crush her pride!

Madouc licked her lips, worked her fingers and uttered a soft hiss. Queen Sollace stood limp-kneed and quivering, mouth agape, arms shaking, fingers twitching so that the whisk dropped away, while her teeth chattered like pebbles shaken in a box. Father Umphred, still wearing his benign smile, uttered a gurgling squeak; then, chattering like an angry squirrel, he hunched low, stamping and kicking as if

performing a Celtic jig. Ermelgart and Lady Vosse, both off to the side, were jarred and shaken, but evinced only a desultory chattering and grinding of the teeth.

Madouc placidly turned and started from the room, only to encounter the bulk of King Casmir. He halted in the doorway. "What is amiss? Why is everyone so wild and so strange?"

Father Umphred spoke plaintively: "Sire, Princess Madouc has learned witch-tricks; she knows a sleight to set us into a fit of confusion, so that our teeth rattle and our brains reel like spinning hoops."

Queen Sollace spoke in a plangent croak: "Father Umphred states the truth! Madouc hisses, or sings a whistling song-I was too unnerved to notice-and instantly our bones turned to jelly, and all our teeth rang and clattered and resounded again and again!"

King Casmir looked down at Madouc. "What is the truth of this?"

Madouc said pensively: "I believe that Queen Sollace took bad advice and started to beat me, then was deterred by her own true kindness. It was Lady Vosse for whom I ordered the whisking; I hope that you will see to it now."

"A farrago of nonsense!" blurted Lady Vosse. "This mad little imp hissed and we were all forced to chatter and jump!"

"Well then, Madouc?" demanded King Casmir.

"It is nothing of consequence." Madouc tried to edge around Casmir's bulk, so that she might gain the door. "Sire, excuse me, if you please."

"I do not so please! Certainly not until matters are clarified for my understanding! What is this 'hissing' that you do?"

"It is a small knack, Your Highness-no



more."

'A small knack'?" cried Queen Sollace.  
"My teeth still wamble and pulse! If you recall, Lady Desdea complained of similar events at Sarris!"

Casmir frowned down at Madouc.  
"Where did you learn this trick?"

Madouc said bravely: "Sire, best for everyone's comfort if we regard the matter as my personal secret."

Casmir looked down in astonishment.  
"Impudence again? Condescension from a foxen fluff of a girl! Ermelgart, bring me the whisk."

Madouc tried to dodge and dart through the doorway, but King Casmir seized her and bent her over his leg. When she tried to hiss, he clapped his hand to her mouth, then thrust a kerchief between her teeth. Taking the whisk from Ermelgart, he struck six majestic strokes, so that the withes whistled through the air.

King Casmir released his grip. Madouc slowly righted her self, tears of humiliation and rage coursing down her cheeks. King Casmir asked in a heavily sardonic voice: "And what do you think of that, Miss Sly-Boots?"

Madouc stood holding both hands to her smarting haunches. "I think that I will ask

my mother for some new tricks."

Casmir opened his mouth, then suddenly became still. After a tense moment he said: "Your mother is dead."

Madouc in her fury thought only to detach herself in utter totality from both Casmir and Sollace. "My mother was not Suldrun, and you know this full well."

"What are you saying?" roared Casmir, standing back. "Is this more impudence?"

Madouc sniffed and decided to say no more.

Casmir blustered on: "If I say your mother is dead, she is dead! Do you want another beating?"

"My mother is the fairy Twisk," said Madouc. "Beat me as you like; it changes nothing. As for my father, he remains a mystery, and I still lack a pedigree."

"Hm hah," said Casmir, thinking over this and that. "Quite so. A pedigree is something everyone should have."

"I am happy that you agree, since one of these days I intend to search out my own."

"Unnecessary!" declared Casmir bluffly.  
"You are Princess Madouc and your pedigree or its lack need never be called into question."

"A fine long pedigree is better than its lack."

"Just so." Casmir looked around the chamber, to find all eyes fixed upon him. He signalled to Madouc. "Come."

King Casmir led the way to his private sitting room. He pointed to a sofa. "Be seated."

Madouc perched herself gingerly upon the cushions, to the best possible

easement of her pain, watching King Casmir warily all the while. King Casmir paced up the length of the room, then back. Madouc's parentage was irrelevant; so long as no one knew the facts. Princess Madouc could be used to cement a valuable alliance. Madouc the changeling waif lacked all value in this regard. Casmir stopped short in his tracks. "You suspect, then, that Suldrun was not your mother?"

"My mother is Twisk. She is alive and she is a fairy."

"I will be frank," said Casmir. "Indeed we knew you for a changeling, but you were so bonny a baby that we could not

put you aside. We took you to our hearts as 'Princess Madouc'. That is how it is today. You enjoy all the privileges of true royalty, and of course the obligations, as well." Casmir's voice changed a degree or two in timbre, and he watched Madouc covertly. "Unless, of course, Suldrun's true-born son came forward to claim his birthright. What do you know of him?"

Madouc wriggled to lessen the throbbing of her scantily padded buttocks. "I asked about my pedigree, but to no avail."

"You did not learn the fate of your counterpart-the changeling who would be Suldrun's son, and just your own

age?"

With great effort Madouc quelled a gleeful laugh. A year in the fairy shee meant time far longer in the outside world perhaps seven years, or eight, or nine; no exact correspondence could be made. Casmir had no inkling of the case. "He is nothing to me," said Madouc. "Perhaps he still haunts the shee. Or he may well be dead; the Forest of Tantrevalles is a perilous place."

King Casmir asked sharply: "Why are you smiling?"

"It is a wince of pain," said Madouc. "Do you not remember? You struck me



six vicious blows. I remember well."

With narrowed eyes King Casmir asked:  
"And what do you mean by that?"

Madouc looked up, blue eyes innocent.  
"I use no special meaning other than the words themselves. Is that not the way you talk?"

King Casmir frowned. "Now then! Let us not maunder and gloom over past grievances! Many happy times lie ahead. To be a princess of Lyonesse is an excellent thing!"

"I hope that you will explain this to Lady Vosse, so that she will obey my orders

or, better, return to Wildmay  
Fourtowers."

King Casmir cleared his throat. "As to that, who knows? Queen Sollace perhaps has a preference. Aha, then, harrumph! Naturally we cannot flaunt our secrets far and wide, for the vulgar interest. Away would fly your chances for a grand marriage! Therefore, we will bury these facts deep in obscurity. I will speak to Ermelgart, the priest and Lady Vosse; they will not gossip. And as always, you are the charming Princess Madouc, full and whole, whom we all love so well."

"I feel sick," said Madouc. "I think I will

go now." She rose to her feet and went to the door. Here she paused to look back over her shoulder, to find King Casmir watching her with a brooding expression, legs apart, arms behind his heavy torso.

Madouc said softly: "Please do not forget; I want no more of Lady Vosse; she has proved herself a disgrace and a failure."

King Casmir only grunted: a sound signifying almost any thing. Madouc turned and left the room.

### III

Spring became summer, but this year there would be no removal to Sarris. The decision had been dictated by affairs of state, King Casmir having become involved in a dangerous game which must be controlled with precision and finesse.

The game had been initiated by a sudden turmoil in the Kingdom of Blaloc. Casmir hoped to manipulate events to his advantage, so blandly that neither King Audry nor King Aillas could reasonably make protest.

The troubles in Blaloc stemmed from a debility suffered by King Milo. After long dedication to the joys of tankard,

tun and beaker, he had at last succumbed to swollen joints, gout and bloat of the liver, and now lay in the dark, apparently moribund, speaking only in grunts. For nourishment the doctors allowed him only raw egg beaten into buttermilk and an occasional oyster, but the regimen seemed to have little beneficial effect.

Of King Milo's three sons, only the youngest, Prince Brezante, had survived, and was now heir-apparent to the throne. Brezante lacked force of character and for a variety of reasons was unpopular with many of the grandees. Others, loyal to King Milo and the House of Valeu, gave Brezante lukewarm support. As

King Milo continued to decline, the factions became ever more definite in their postures and there was ominous talk of civil strife.

King Milo's authority dwindled by the day, in step with his health, and dukes of the outer provinces ruled their fiefs like independent monarchs. From these troubled circumstances King Casmir hoped to work profit for himself. He contrived a series of small but irking provocations between his own border barons and those dissident dukes whose lands were convenient for the exercise. Every day some small new foray was made into Blaloc from the remote corners of Lyonesse. Sooner or later, so

Casmir hoped, one or another of the hot-headed Blaloc dukes, jealous of his prerogatives, would be prompted into a retaliation-whereupon Casmir, on the pretext of maintaining order, keeping the peace and supporting the rule of King Milo, could dispatch an overwhelming force from the nearby Fort Mael and gain control over Blaloc. Then, responding to the prayers of those factions opposed to Prince Brezante, King Casmir would graciously accede to assuming the crown of Blaloc, thereby joining Blaloc to Lyonesse. And neither King Audry of Dahaut nor King Aillas of Troicinet could accuse him of extraordinary conduct.

Days passed, and weeks, with King Casmir playing a most delicate and cautious game. The dissident dukes of Blaloc, while infuriated by the raids from Lyonesse, sensed the dangers of reprisal, and bided their time. At Twissamy, Prince Brezante, recently wed to a young princess from the Kingdom of Bor in South Wales, detached himself from his matrimonial duties long enough to notice that all was not well across the land. Noblemen loyal to King Milo inveighed upon him, until at last he sent off dispatches to King Audry and King Aillas, alerting them to the peculiar rash of forays, raids and provocations current along the



Lyonesse border.

King Audry's response was couched in general terms. He suggested that King Milo and Prince Brezante might have misinterpreted a few untoward but probably insignificant incidents. He counseled Prince Brezante to discretion. "Above all, we must be suspicious of sudden guesses or presumptions- 'jumps into the dark' is my own style of expressing the case. These sudden acts are often bootless and perfervid. Every falling acorn should not send us forth to complain that the sky is falling. This principle of strong and even statesmanship is my personal preference, and I endorse it to you, in the hope that

you may find it equally useful. In any case, be assured of our benevolent good wishes."

King Aillas responded differently. He sailed from Domreis with a flotilla of nine warships on what he announced to be 'naval maneuvers'. As if on sudden impulse he paid an unscheduled visit to Lyonesse Town aboard the Sangranada, a galleass of three masts.

With the Sangranada standing offshore, Aillas sent a boat into the harbour with a dispatch for King Casmir, requesting permission to enter the harbour. His visit, he stated, since it was fortuitous, would be informal and devoid of

ceremony; still he hoped to exchange views with King Casmir on matters of mutual interest.

Permission to enter the harbour was at once forthcoming; the Sangranada eased through the harbour entrance and was warped alongside the dock. The remainder of the flotilla lay offshore, anchoring in the open roadstead. With a small entourage Aillas and Dhrun disembarked from the Sangranada. King Casmir awaited them in his state carriage; the group rode up the Sfer Arct to Castle Haidion.

Along the way Casmir expressed concern for the ships anchored out along

the roadstead. "So long as the wind is light and offshore or from the west, there is no danger. But should the wind shift, your ships must instantly put to sea."

"Our stay will be short for that reason," said Aillas. "Still, the weather should hold for a day or two."

"It is a pity you must leave so soon," said Casmir politely. "Perhaps there will be time to arrange a tournament of jousting. You and Prince Dhrun might even care to participate."

"Not I," said Aillas. "The sport consists of taking hard knocks and bruises, then falling from one's horse. I have no taste

for it."

"And Dhrun?"

"I am far more apt with the diabolos."

"As you like," said King Casmir. "Our entertainment, then, will be quite informal."

"That suits me very well," said Aillas. As always, when he spoke with King Casmir, he marvelled at his own capacity for dissimulation, since in all the world there was no one he hated more than Casmir. "Still, since the winds have kindly blown us to your shores, we might spend a profitable hour or two

discussing the way of the world."

King Casmir assented. "So it shall be."

Aillas and Dhrun were conducted to chambers in the East Tower, where they bathed, changed their garments, then went to dine with the royal family. For the occasion Casmir chose to use the Green Hall, so-called for the panels of green-stained willow and the great rug, gray-green with a scattering of red flowers.

Aillas and Dhrun, arriving in the Green Hall, found the royal family already on hand. No other guests were present; the dinner evidently was to be completely

informal. King Casmir stood by the fireplace, cracking walnuts, eating the meats and hurling the shells into the fire. Sollace sat placidly nearby, statuesque as always, her coils of blonde hair confined in a net of pearls. Madouc stood to the side, staring into the fire, her expression remote and her thoughts apparently far away. She had allowed herself to be dressed in a dark blue frock with a white frill at the neck; a white ribbon bound her hair, so that the copper-gold curls lay in ordered locks, framing her face to advantage. Dame Etarre, who supervised Madouc's wardrobe (Madouc would not allow Lady Vosse into her chambers), had reported to Queen Sollace: "For once

she has allowed herself to seem something other than a wild thing."

Lady Vosse, who stood nearby, grunted. "Her moods are unfathomable."

"I refuse to speculate," said Queen Sollace with a sniff. "Thank you, Dame Etarre; you may go." Dame Etarre bowed and left the chamber. Queen Sollace went on to say: "What with her highly dubious background-this, of course, we are not allowed to discuss-her volatility should come as no surprise."

"The situation is extraordinary," said Lady Vosse heavily. "Still, the king's



orders are clear and it is not for me to doubt their wisdom."

"There is no mystery involved," said Queen Sollace. "We hope to marry her to advantage. Meanwhile, we must bear with her quirks."

Sitting in the Green Hall, Queen Sollace gave Madouc a covert appraisal. She would never be a real beauty, thought Sollace, though admittedly she exerted a certain jaunty appeal. There was simply not enough of her in the places where it mattered, nor was there any promise that such endowments would ever be hers. A pity, thought Sollace comfortably. Ripeness and amplitude were the first

and most essential ingredients of true comeliness. Men liked to grasp something substantial when in a mood to do so: this was Queen Sollace's experience.

Upon the arrival of Aillas and Dhrun, the party took their places at the table: King Casmir at one end, King Aillas opposite, Queen Sollace to one side, Dhrun and Madouc to the other. The dinner, as Casmir had promised, was a relatively simple repast: salmon poached in wine, a peasant stew of woodcock, onions and barley; boiled sheep's head with parsley and currants; ducks roasted with a stuffing of olives and turnips; a haunch of venison served with red sauce; a

dessert of cheeses, pickled tongue, pears and apples.

Madouc sat pensively, taking only a fragment of fowl, a swallow of wine, and a few grapes from the centerpiece. To Dhrun's attempts at conversation, Madouc responded without spontaneity, so that Dhrun became puzzled-unless, he speculated, this might be her ordinary conduct in the presence of the king and queen.

The meal came to its conclusion. For a period the party sat sipping that sweet soft wine known as Fialorosa, served in the squat traditional goblets of purple glass, twisted and warped into engaging

shapes so that no two were alike. At last, King Casmir signalled his intention to retire, the party rose from their chairs, bade each other goodnight and went off to their respective chambers.

In the morning, Aillas and Dhrun breakfasted at leisure in a small sunny morning parlour adjoining their chambers. Presently Sir Mungo the High Seneschal appeared with the message that King Casmir would be pleased to confer with King Aillas at his convenience-immediately, if he felt so inclined. Aillas acquiesced to the proposal and Sir Mungo conducted him to the king's sitting room, where Casmir rose to meet him.

"Will you sit?" asked Casmir. He indicated a chair. Aillas bowed and seated himself; Casmir settled into a similar chair nearby. At Casmir's sign, Sir Mungo retired.

"This is not only a pleasant occasion," said Aillas. "It also allows us an opportunity to exchange views. We are not often in communication."

Casmir assented. "Yes, the world remains in its place. Our deficiency has caused no grand cataclysm."

"Still, the world changes and one year is never like the next. With communication between us, and coordination of our

policies, we would, at the very least, avoid the risk of surprising one another."

King Casmir gave an affable wave of the hand. "It is a persuasive idea, if over-elaborate. Life in Lyonesse moves at a hum drum pace."

"Just so. It is amazing how some small or humdrum episode, trivial in itself, can cause an important event."

King Casmir asked cautiously: "Are you referring to any specific event?"

"Nothing in particular. Last month I learned that King Sigismondo the Goth intended to land a war party on the north

shore of Wysrod, where he would take up lands and defy King Audry. He was deterred only because his advisers assured him that he would instantly be engaged by the full might of Troicinet, as well as the Daut armies, and would face certain disaster. Sigismondo drew back, and is now considering an expedition against the Kingdom of Kharesm."

Casmir thoughtfully stroked his beard. "I heard nothing of this."

"Odd," said Aillas. "Your agents are notoriously efficient."

"You are not alone in fearing surprises," said Casmir with a sour smile.

"Extraordinary that you should say so! Last night my mind was active and I lay awake formulating plans by the dozen. One of these I wish to submit to you. In effect, and to use your words, it would remove the component of fear from surprises."

Casmir asked skeptically: "What sort of proposal might this be?"

"I suggest quick consultation in the event of emergency, such as a Gothic incursion, or any other breach of the peace, with an eye to coordinated response."

"Ha hm," said Casmir. "Your scheme



might well be cumbersome."

Aillas gave a polite laugh. "I hope that I have not exaggerated the scope of my ideas. They are not much different from the goals which I established last year. The Elder Isles are at peace; we must ensure, you and I, that this peace persists. Last year my envoys offered defensive alliances to every realm of the Elder Isles. Both King Kestrel of Pomperol and King Milo of Blaloc accepted our guarantees; we will therefore defend them against attack. King Milo, so I am told, is ill and also must contend with his disloyal dukes. For this reason the flotilla now at anchor in the roadstead will immediately make

sail for Blaloc, in order to indicate our confidence in King Milo, and give pause to his enemies. I will show no mercy to anyone who tries to subvert his rule or its orderly transition. Blaloc must remain independent."

Casmir for a space had no comment to make. Then he said: "Such solitary excursions might be misunderstood."

"I am concerned on just this account. Hence I would be happy to gain your endorsement for the program, in which case there would be no mistakes, and King Milo's enemies would be defeated out of hand."

King Casmir smiled a quizzical smile.  
"They might argue that their cause is just."

"More likely they hope to curry favor with some speculative new regime, which could only result in trouble. There is no need for any but a legitimate succession to the throne."

"Unfortunately, Prince Brezante is something of a weak reed and is not everywhere popular. Hence the disturbances inside Blaloc."

"Prince Brezante is adequate to the needs of Blaloc, which are not demanding. Naturally we would prefer

King Milo's full recovery."

"His prospects are poor. Now he takes only a single quail egg poached in buttermilk for his meal. But are we not straying from the subject? What is your proposal?"

"I will point out the obvious, that our two realms are the most powerful of the Elder Isles. I propose that we issue a joint protocol guaranteeing territorial integrity everywhere through out the Elder Isles. The effects of such a doctrine would be profound."

King Casmir's face had become a stony mask. "Your goals do you credit, but

certain of your assumptions may be unrealistic."

"I make only one assumption of any importance," said Aillas. "I assume that you are as dedicated to peace as I am. There is no other possibility save the reverse: that you are not dedicated to peace, which is of course absurd."

King Casmir showed a small sardonic smile. "All very well, but would not your doctrine be considered somewhat vague, or even naive?"

"I think not," said Aillas. "The central idea is clear enough. A potential aggressor would be deterred for fear of

certain defeat, along with punishment and an end to his dynasty.

"I will certainly give your proposal careful consideration," said King Casmir woodenly.

"I expect no more," said Aillas.

## IV

While Aillas expounded his implausible schemes to King Casmir, Dhrun and Madouc went out upon the front terrace and stood leaning against the balustrade. Below them was the quadrangle known as the 'King's Parade' and, beyond, all of Lyonesse Town. Today, despite Lady

Vosse's disapproval, Madouc wore her ordinary garments: a knee-length frock of oatmeal-colored nubble-cloth, belted at the waist. A band of plaited blue cord bound her curls, with a tassel dangling beside her left ear; she wore sandals on her bare feet.

Dhrun found the tassel intriguing and was moved to comment: "You wear that tassel with remarkable flair."

Madouc pretended indifference and made a flippant gesture. "It is nothing much: a caprice, no more."

"It is a distinctly jaunty caprice, with more than a hint of fairy panache. Your

mother Twisk might well wear that tassel with pride."

Madouc gave her head a doubtful shake. "When I saw her she wore neither tassels nor ties, and her hair floated like a blue fog." Madouc considered a moment. "Of course, I am not well acquainted with fairy fashions. There is not much fairy stuff left in me."

Dhrun inspected her from head to toe. "I would not be too sure on that account."

Madouc shrugged. "Remember: I never lived among the fairies; I have eaten no fairy bread, nor drunk fairy wine. The fairy stuff-"



"It is called 'soul'. It is true that the 'soul' drains away, leaving only human dross behind."

Madouc looked reflectively out over the town. "All taken with all, I do not like to think of myself as 'human dross'."

"Of course not! Never would I consider you such!"

"I am pleased to hear your good opinion," said Madouc modestly.

"You knew it before," said Dhruv.

"Also, if I may say so, I am relieved to see you in good spirits. Last night you were almost morose. I wondered if you

were bored with the company."

"Was my mood so apparent?"

"You seemed, at the very least, subdued."

"Still, I was not bored."

"Why were you unhappy?"

Once again Madouc looked out over the vista. "Must I explain the truth?"

"I will take my chances," said Dhrun. "I can only hope that your remarks are not too corrosive. Tell me the truth."

"I am the one who takes chances," said

Madouc. "But I am reckless and I know no better. The truth is this: I was so pleased to see you that I became sick and miserable."

"Remarkable!" said Dhrun. "And when I leave, sorrow will cause you to sing and dance for sheer merriment."

Madouc said dolefully: "You are laughing at me."

"No. Not really."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"I think there is more fairy stuff in you than you suspect."

Madouc gave a thoughtful nod, as if Dhrun had addressed certain of her own suspicions. "You lived long at Thripsey Shee; you yourself should be charged with fairy stuff."

"Sometimes I fear as much. A human child too long at the shee becomes addled and moonstruck. Thereafter he is good for nothing but to play wild music on the pipes. When he starts up a jig, the folk can never leave off dancing; they must hop and skip till their shoes wear out."

Madouc gave Dhrun a wondering examination. "You do not seem moonstruck to me-though I am no proper

judge. By chance, do you play the pipes?"

Dhrun nodded. "For a time I piped tunes for a troupe of dancing cats. That was long ago. It would not be considered dignified now."

"When you played, did people dance without restraint? If so, I would like you to play, as if by casual impulse, for the king and queen and Lady Vosse. Sir Mungo also might be helped by a few capers, and also Zerling the executioner."

"I did not bring my pipes," said Dhrun.  
"The fairy waft is draining away, and my

temperament has become somewhat dull.  
Perhaps I am not moonstruck after all."

"Do you often think of the shee?"

"Occasionally. But the memories are blurred, as if I were recalling a dream."

"Do you remember my mother Twisk?"

"Not well; in fact, not at all. I remember King Throbious and Queen Bossum, and also an imp named Falael who was jealous of me. I remember festivals in the moonlight and sitting in the grass making flower chains."

"Would you like to visit the shee again?"

Dhrun gave his head an emphatic shake. "They would think I had come for favors and play me a dozen wicked tricks."

"The shee is not far away?"

"It is north of Little Saffield on Old Street. A lane leads to Tawn Timble and Glymwode and on into the forest, and so to Thripsey Shee on Madling Meadow."

"It should not be too hard to find."

Dhrun spoke in surprise: "Surely you are not planning to visit the shee yourself?"

Madouc gave an evasive response. "I have no immediate plans."

"I would advise against any plans whatever, indefinite or otherwise. The roads are dangerous. The forest is strange. Fairies are not to be trusted."

Madouc seemed unconcerned. "My mother would protect me from harm."

"Do not be too sure! If she were cross and the day had gone badly, she might give you a badger's face or a long blue nose, for no reason whatever."

Madouc said positively: "My mother would never harm her own dear daughter!"

"Why would you want to go in the first



place? They would not receive you nicely."

"I care nothing for that. I want only to learn news of my father, and what might be his name and his estate, and where he now lives: perhaps at some fine castle overlooking the sea!"

"What does your mother say to this?"

"She pretends to remember nothing. I believe that she has not told me everything she knows."

Dhrun was dubious. "Why should she hide the information? Unless your father was a scapegrace and a vagabond, of

whom she is ashamed."

"Hm," said Madouc. "I had not thought of that. But it is hardly likely-or so I hope."

From the castle came King Casmir and Aillas, both showing faces of conventional impassivity.

Aillas spoke to Dhrun: "The wind seems to be shifting toward the south, and we had best gain sea room before conditions worsen."

"It is a pity we must go so soon," said Dhrun.

"True! Still, that is the way of it. I have invited King Casmir, along with Queen Sollace and the princess, to spend a week with us at Watershade later this summer."

"That would be a pleasant occasion!" said Dhrun. "Watershade would be at its best! I hope that Your Majesty will decide to visit us. It is not too irksome a trip!"

"It would be my great pleasure, if the press of affairs permits," said King Casmir. "I see that the carriage awaits; I will make my farewells here and now."

"That is quite in order," said Aillas.

"Goodbye, Madouc." He kissed her cheek.

"Goodbye! I am sorry that you are going so soon!"

Dhrun bent to kiss Madouc's cheek, and said, "Goodbye. We will see you again before long, perhaps at Watershade!"

"I hope so."

Dhrun turned away and followed Aillas down the stone steps to the road, where the carriage awaited them.

V

King Casmir stood by the window of his private parlour, legs apart, hands clasped behind his back. The Troice flotilla had departed and was gone beyond the eastern headlands; the Lir stretched blank and wide before him. Casmir muttered soft words under his breath and turned away from the window. Hands still clasped behind his back, he paced back and forth across the room, slow step after slow step, head bent forward so that his beard brushed his chest.

Queen Sollace entered the parlour. She halted and stood watching King Casmir's ponderous travels. Casmir darted her an ice-blue glance sideways from under his

eyebrows, and continued to pace in silence. With nostrils haughtily pinched, Queen Sollace marched across the room to the couch and seated herself. King Casmir at last halted. He spoke, as much to himself as to Sollace. "It cannot be brushed aside. Once again my progress is checked and my great effort thwarted-by the same agency and for the same reasons. The facts are blunt. I must accept them."

"Indeed?" asked Sollace. "What are these ugly facts which cause you such distress?"

"They concern my plans for Blaloc," grumbled Casmir. "I cannot intervene

without bringing Aillas and his Troice warships down around my ears.

Thereupon that fat jackal Audry would be sure to turn on me, and I cannot withstand so many blows from so many directions."

"Perhaps you should adopt a different plan," said Queen Sollace brightly. "Or you might make do with no plan at all."

"Ha!" barked Casmir. "So it might seem! King Aillas talks softly and with great politeness; he has the uncomfortable skill

of calling one a false-hearted blackguard, a liar, a cheat and a villain,

but making it seem a compliment."

Queen Sollace shook her head in bewilderment. "I am surprised! I thought King Aillas and Prince Dhrun had come to pay a courtesy call."

"That was not his only reasonI assure you of that!"

Queen Sollace sighed. "King Aillas has achieved his own great successes; why cannot he be more tolerant of your hopes and dreams? There must be an element of jealousy at work."

Casmir nodded curtly. "There is no love lost between us, that is fact. Still, he



only acts as he must. He knows my ultimate goal as well as I know it myself!"

"But it is a glorious goal!" bleated Queen Sollace. "To unite the Elder Isles once again, as of old: that is a noble dream! It would surely give impetus to our holy faith! Think! One day Father Umphred might be Archbishop over all the Elder Isles!"

King Casmir spoke in disgust: "Once again you have been listening to that clabber-faced priest. He has cozened you into your cathedral; let that suffice."

Queen Sollace raised her moist gaze to

the ceiling. She spoke in long-suffering tones: "No matter what else, please realize that my prayers are dedicated to your success. You must surely win in the end!"

"I wish it were so easy." King Casmir flung himself heavily into a chair. "All is not lost. I am checked in Blaloc, but there are always two ways around the barn!"

"Your meaning escapes me."

"I will give new instructions to my agents. There will be no more disorder. When King Milo dies, Brezante will be king. We will give him Madouc in

marriage, and by this means join our houses."

Queen Sollace made an objection.

"Brezante is already wed! He married Glodwyn of Bor!"

"She was frail, young and sickly, and she died in childbirth. Brezante is notably uxorious, and he will be quite ready for new nuptials."

Queen Sollace said mournfully: "Poor little Glodwyn! She was barely more than a child; it is said she never gave over her homesickness."

Casmir shrugged. "Still and all, it might

well work to our advantage. King Milo is as good as dead. Brezante is a bit dull, a factor favorable to our cause. We must make occasion for his visit."

Sollace said doubtfully: "Brezante is not altogether gallant, nor is he handsome, or even dashing. His penchant for young maidens is notorious."

"Bah! Old or young, what of that? The business is all cut from the same cloth! Kings are above small-minded scandal."

Queen Sollace sniffed. "And queens as well, no doubt!" Casmir, staring thoughtfully across the room, ignored the remark.

"One matter further," said Sollace. "I refer to Madouc. She is difficult in matters of this sort."

"She will obey because she must," said Casmir. "It is I who am king, not Madouc."

"Aha! But it is Madouc who is Madouc!"

"We cannot make bread without flour. Scrawny red-headed little whelp she may be: still she must yield to my command."

"She is not ugly," said Queen Sollace. "Her time has come, and she is developing-slowly, of course, and with

little to show for the effort. She will never boast a fashionable figure, such as mine."

"It will be enough to affect Brezante." He slapped his hands decisively on the arms of the chair. "I am prepared to act with expedition."

"Your policy is no doubt wise," said Queen Sollace. "Still-"

"Still what?"

"Nothing of consequence."

King Casmir acted without delay. Three couriers rode off from Haidion into the

evening: the first to Fort Mael, ordering a return to routine conditions; the second to a high-placed agent in Twissamy; the third to King Milo, wishing him health, deploring the ruffians who flouted royal authority, and inviting King Milo and Prince Brezante to Haidion for a gala visit. Or Prince Brezante alone, if King Milo's health made such a visit impractical.

A few days later the couriers returned. From Fort Mael and the agent in Twissamy came simple acknowledgments that Casmir's orders had been received and would be acted upon. From King Milo came a dispatch of greater interest. King Milo thanked

King Casmir for his kindly wishes and fraternal support. Next he announced his return to jovial good health and described how the change had come about. In a passage of some length he described the circumstances. It seemed that one day, just prior to his dinner, a sudden desperate spasm came upon him. Instead of his usual regimen: one quail egg and half a gill of buttermilk, he commanded a joint of roast beef with horse radish and suet pudding, a suckling pig fresh from the spit surrounded by roast cinnamon apples, a pot of pigeon stew and three gallons of good red wine. For his supper he took a more moderate repast of four roast fowl, a pork and onion pie, a salmon and a number of



sausages, along with sufficient wine to assist in digestion. After a night's sound sleep, he breakfasted on fried flounder, three dozen oysters, a raisin cake, a cassoulet of broad beans and ham for a savory, and a tankard or two of a particularly fine white wine. It was this return to a sound and wholesome diet, declared King Milo, which had renewed his strength; he now felt as good as new, if not better. Therefore, wrote King Milo, he and the recently bereaved Prince Brezante would be delighted to accept King Casmir's invitation. Neither he nor Brezante would be reluctant to discuss the topic at which King Casmir had hinted. He endorsed King Casmir's

suggestion that an era of friendlier relations between their two realms was about to be initiated.

Madouc learned of the projected visit from several sources, but it remained for Devonet to explain the occasion in detail. "You will find Prince Brezante very attentive," said Devonet airily. "He may wish to take you somewhere alone, perhaps to his rooms, for a game of 'sly' or 'fiddle-de-doodle'; in this case you must be on your guard. Brezante is partial to young maidens. He may even suggest a marriage contract! In any case you should not succumb to his blandishments, since some men become bored with easy conquests."

Madouc said stiffly: "You need not fear on that account. I am interested neither in Prince Brezante nor his blandishments."

Devonet paid no heed. "Think of it! Is it not exciting? Some day you might be Queen Madouc of Blaloc!"

"I think not."

Devonet spoke reasonably: "I agree that Brezante is not the most comely of men; indeed, he is fleshy and squat, with a round belly and a big nose. Still, what of that? He is a royal prince, and you are to be envied, or so I suppose."

"You are talking sheer foolishness. I

have not the slightest interest in Prince Brezante, nor he in me."

"Do not be too sure of that! You are much like his previous spouse. She was a young princess from Wales-a little wisp of a thing, naive and innocent."

Chlodys joined the conversation with eager zest. "They say that she cried constantly from both homesickness and distress! I believe that eventually she went out of her mind, poor thing. Prince Brezante was troubled not at all and bedded with her nightly, until at last she died in childbirth."

"It is a sad story," said Madouc.

"Exactly! The little princess is dead and Prince Brezante is heartsick. You must do your best to console him."

"He will surely want to kiss you," said Chlodys with a giggle. "If so, you must kiss him nicely in return; that is the way one wins a husband. Am I not right, Devonet?"

"That is one of the ways, certainly."

Madouc spoke with disdain: "Sometimes I marvel at the ideas which seep through your minds!"

"Ah well," sighed Devonet. "It is less disgraceful to think than to do."

"Although not so much fun," added Chlodys.

"Either of you, or both, are welcome to Prince Brezante," said Madouc. "He will surely find you more interesting than I."

Later in the day King Casmir met Madouc in the gallery. He was about to pass her by, eyes averted, in his usual style; instead, he stopped in his tracks. "Madouc, I want a word with you."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Come with me." King Casmir led the way into a nearby council chamber, with

Madouc lagging reluctantly six paces behind.

Casmir, smiling the smallest of grim smiles, waited by the door until Madouc entered, then closed the door and went to stand by the table. "Sit."

Madouc seated herself primly in a chair across the table from Casmir.

"I must now instruct you," said Casmir ponderously. "Listen with care and heed me well. Certain events of importance are in the offing. King Milo of Blaloc will presently be our guest, in company with Queen Caudabil and Prince Brezante. I intend to propose a contract

of betrothal between you and Prince Brezante. The marriage will be joined at an appropriate time, possibly in three years. It will be an important marriage, in that it will consolidate a strong alliance with Blaloc, to counter Pornperol's tendency toward Dahaut. These are affairs of state which you will not understand, but you must believe that they are of the highest priority."

Madouc tried to think of something to say that would delicately convey her feelings and yet not enrage King Casmir. Several times she started to speak, then thought better of her remarks, and closed her mouth. At last she said, rather lamely:



"Prince Brezante may not favor such a match."

"I suspect otherwise. King Milo has already expressed interest in the arrangement. Almost certainly an announcement will be made during the royal visit. It is a good match for you, and you may consider yourself lucky. Now then, attend! Lady Vosse will instruct you in the proprieties which must be observed. I expect total decorum from you on this occasion. You may not indulge in any of your famous vapors or tantrums, at risk of my extreme displeasure. Is this quite clear?"

Madouc answered in a tremulous voice:

"Yes, Your High ness, I understand your words." She drew a deep breath. "But they fly wide of the mark. It is best that you should know this now."

King Casmir started to speak, using a dangerous voice, but Madouc was quick to anticipate him. "In ordinary matters I would hope to obey you, but remember: my marriage is far more important to me than it is to you."

King Casmir bent slowly forward. Over the years dozens of frightened wretches had seen such an expression on his face before being dragged away to torment in the dungeons under the Peinhador. Casmir spoke from deep in his throat:

"So you think to thwart my volition?"

Madouc spoke more carefully than ever.

"There are circumstances, Your Highness, which make the plan impossible!"

"What circumstances are these?"

"First, I despise Prince Brezante. If he is so anxious to marry, let him betroth himself to Lady Vosse or Chlodys.

Second, if you will recall, I am born of halfling mother and an unknown father. My pedigree is lacking; for this reason, my maidens call me 'bastard', which I cannot deny. If King Milo knew of this, he would consider the betrothal a

mockery, and an insult to his house."

King Casmir blinked and stood silent. Madouc rose to her feet and stood demurely leaning on the table.

"Therefore, Your Highness, the betrothal is not possible. You must make other plans, which do not include me."

"Bah!" muttered Casmir. "All these circumstances are small fish in a big pan. Neither Milo nor Brezante need know of them! After all, who would tell them?"

"The task would fall to me," said Madouc. "It would be my duty."

"That is sheer blather!"

Madouc hurried on, her tongue almost tripping over itself. "Not so, Your Highness! I merely use the faith and candour I have learned from your noble example! Decent respect for the honour of both royal houses would compel me to admit my condition, no matter what the consequences!"

King Casmir spoke out harshly: "It means nothing; I assure you of this! To talk of honour is frivol and foolishness! If it is a pedigree you need, the heralds will contrive something suitable and I will fix it upon you by ordinance!"

Madouc smilingly shook her head. "Bad cheese stinks, no matter how thin it is sliced. Such a pedigree would be a laughable deceit. Folk would call you a black-hearted monster, as false as a stoat, ready for any lie or duplicity. Everyone would sneer and joke; I would be doubly ridiculed, and doubly demeaned, for allowing such a brazen falsity! They would further call you a-"

Casmir made a brusque gesture. "Stop! That is enough!"

Madouc said meekly: "I was only explaining why my true and very own pedigree is essential to me."

King Casmir's patience was wearing thin. "This is folly, and I quite beside the point! I do not propose to be thwarted by such paltriness! Now then-"

Madouc cried out plaintively: "The facts cannot be denied, Your Highness! I lack all pedigree."

"Then construct yourself a pedigree, or find one that you deem proper, and it shall be fixed upon you by fiat! Only be quick! Ask Spargoy the Chief Herald for help."

"I would prefer the help of someone else."

"Whoever you like! Fact or fancy, it is all one; I am indifferent to your whims. Only be quick!"

"Just so, Your Majesty. I will do as you command."

Casmir's attention was caught by a bland overtone in Madouc's response: why had she become so docile? "In the meantime, I will initiate discussions in regard to the betrothal. This must proceed!"

Madouc gave a poignant little cry of protest. "Your Highness, have I not just explained that this cannot be?"

Casmir's torso seemed to swell. Madouc



moved a slow step around the table, to put its maximum diameter between her and King Casmir. She cried out:

"Nothing has changed, Your Highness! I will search everywhere for my pedigree, but even should I discover the King of Byzantium for my sire, Prince Brezante remains as obnoxious as ever. If he speaks a single word to me, I shall declare myself an orphan bastard whom King Casmir wishes to foist off on him. If he is not deterred I will show him the 'Tinkle-toe Imp-spring', so that he leaps six feet into the air."

King Casmir's cheeks had become pink and his eyes bulged blue from his face. He took three strides around the table, in

order that he might seize Madouc and beat her well. Madouc warily darted off an equal distance around the table.

Casmir

lumbered in pursuit, but Madouc ran nimbly to keep the table always between them. Casmir at last halted, breathing hard both from passion and exertion. Madouc said breathlessly: "You must excuse me for evading you, Your Highness, but I do not care to be beaten again."

"I will call the footmen," said Casmir. "They will take you to a dark room, and I will beat you at my leisure and perhaps do else to you. No one defies me and

escapes unscathed." He took a slow step around the table, staring fixedly at Madouc as if trying to fascinate her into immobility.

Madouc sidled aside, and spoke tremulously: "I beg you not to do such things, Your Highness! You will notice that I have not used my fairy magic upon you, which would be disrespectful. I command not only the 'Sissle-way' and the 'Tinkle-toe' but also-" Madouc groped for inspiration, which was not slow in coming "-an irksome spell called 'Insect's Arrayance', to be used only on persons who threaten me!"

"Oh?" asked King Casmir in a gentle

voice. "Tell me of this spell!" And he took a slow step around the table.

Madouc hurriedly skipped aside. "When I am compelled to afflict some vile cur of a villain, insects swarm upon him from all directions! By day and by night they come, high and low, down from the sky, up from the soil!"

"That is an unnerving prospect."

"True, Your Highness! Please do not creep around the table, as you frighten me and I might blurt out the 'Arrayance' by mistake!"

"Indeed? Tell me more of this

marvellous spell."

"First come the fleas! They jump through the vile cur's golden beard, also his hair; they swarm in his rich garments till he tears his skin for scratching!"

"Irk some! Stand quietly, and tell me more!" King Casmir made a sudden movement; Madouc jumped around the table and spoke in desperate haste:

"When he sleeps large spiders crawl across his face! Weevils burrow into his skin and drop from his nose! He finds beetles in his soup and roaches in his porridge! Blowflies crawl into his mouth and lay eggs in his ears; when he walks out he is beleaguered by gnats and

moths and darting grasshoppers; wasps and bumblebees sting him at random!"

King Casmir stood scowling. "And you control this awful spell?"

"Oh yes indeed! There is worse to come! Should the villain fall to the ground, he is instantly overcome by a seethe of ants. Naturally, I would use this spell only to protect myself!"

"Of course!" King Casmir smiled a small hard smile. "But do you truly command a spell of such power? I suspect not."

"In all candour, I have forgotten one or

two of the syllables," said Madouc bravely. "However they come readily enough from my mother's tongue. I can call her at need, and she will transform my enemies into toads, moles or salamanders, as I dictate, and this you must believe, since it is truth!"

King Casmir stared at Madouc a long moment. He made an abrupt gesture signifying a dozen emotions. "Go. Remove yourself from my sight."

Madouc performed a dainty little curtsy. "I am grateful for Your Majesty's kind clemency." She slipped gingerly past Casmir; then, with a sly glance back over her shoulder, ran

quickly from the room.

## VI

King Casmir walked with a slow and ponderous tread along the gallery, up the stairs and, after a moment's pause, along the corridor to the queen's sitting room. The footman standing at attention thrust the door wide; King Casmir marched into the room. Discovering Queen Sollace in earnest colloquy with Father Umphred, King Casmir stopped short and stood glowering. Queen and priest turned to look at him, their voices instantly hushed. Father Umphred performed a smiling bow. Casmir,



ignoring the salute, marched across the room to the window, where he stood in morose contemplation of the vista.

After a respectful pause, Queen Sollace and Father Umphred resumed their conversation: at first in muted tones so as not to intrude upon King Casmir's cogitations; then, as he seemed neither to heed nor to hear, in their ordinary voices. As usual, they discussed the new cathedral. The two were agreed that all appurtenances and furnishings should be of the richest and most superb quality; only the best could be considered suitable.

"The focus of all-one might say, the

inspirational node-is the altar," declared Father Umphred. "It is where all eyes look and the source from which rings out the Holy Word! We must ensure that it equals or transcends any other of Christendom!"

"I am of like mind," said Queen Sollace. "How fortunate we are! It is an opportunity vouchsafed to very few!"

"Exactly so, dear lady!" Father Umphred turned a side glance toward the bulky figure at the window, but King Casmir seemed absorbed in his own thoughts. "I have prepared certain drawings; unfortunately I neglected to bring them with me."

Queen Sollace gave a cry of disappointment. "Describe them, if you will! I would be interested to hear!"

Father Umphred bowed. "I envision an altar of rare wood supported by fluted columns of pink Cappadocian marble. To either side candelabra of seven sconces shall stand, stately and tall, like transfigured luciferous angels! Such will be their effect! Eventually they shall be wrought of pure gold; for the nonce we will use articles of gold leaf on plaster."

"We will do what needs to be done!"

"Below the altar is stationed the pyx, on a table of fine wood carved with a frieze

depicting the twelve archangels. The pyx shall be a vessel of silver, inlaid with carbuncles, lapis and jade; it shall rest on a cloth embroidered with sacred signs, in simulation of that holy cloth known as the 'Tasthapes'. Behind the altar, the wall will be divided into twelve panels, each enamelled in designs of pure color to represent a scene of portent, for the joy of the beholder and the glory of the Faith."

Queen Sollace spoke fervently: "I can see it now, as if in a vision! The concept moves me deeply!"

Father Umphred, after another quick glance toward the window, said: "My

dear lady, you are obviously sensitive to spiritual influences, and far beyond the ordinary! But let us consider how best to order our holy relics. The question is this: should we provide a particular reliquarium-let us say, to the side of the vestibule? Or perhaps a more general display in one of the transepts, or both, in the event we acquire several of these sacred objects?"

Queen Sollace said wistfully, "As of now, with nothing to display, we can make no serious plans."

Father Umphred made a gesture of reproach. "Have faith, dear lady! It has sustained you in the past! These objects

exist, and we will procure them."

"But can you be certain of this?"

"With faith and perseverance, we will find them, wherever they may be! Some remain to be discovered; others have been cherished and lost, and need finding again. I cite you the Cross of Saint Elric, who was cooked and eaten by the ogre Magre, one limb at a time. To fortify himself during the ordeal, he fashioned a crucifix from his two discarded tibia. This crucifix was at one time a treasure of Saint Bac's Monastery at Dun Cruighre; where is it now? Who knows?"

"Then how would we find it?"

"Through careful and dedicated search. I cite also the Talisman of Saint Uldine, who worked to convert Phogastus, troll of Black Meira Tarn. Her efforts were extended; indeed, she bore Phogastus four implings<sup>10</sup>, each with a round bloodstone in the place of a third eye. The four stones were detached and set into a talisman, now immured somewhere among the crypts at Whanish Isle. This is also an object of mighty force; still it could be won by a person staunch and intrepid. In Galicia, on the Pico Alto, is a monastery founded by the heretic Bishop Sangiblas. The monks preserve in their crypts one of the nails

which pinned the feet of Our Saviour. I could cite other such relics. Those which are not lost are revered and guarded with care. They might be difficult to obtain."

Queen Sollace spoke decisively: "No good thing comes with out hardship. That is the lesson of life!"

"How true!" intoned Father Umphred. "Your Highness has succinctly clarified a whole heron's nest of untidy ambiguities!"

Queen Sollace asked: "Was there not some talk of the Grail? I refer to that sacred utensil used by the Saviour at his



Last Supper, and which Joseph of Arimathea caught blood from the divine wounds. What are the tidings of this sanctified vessel?"

Father Umphred pursed his lips. "The reports are not exact. We know that it was brought to Glastonbury Abbey by Joseph of Arimathea, then carried to Ireland and housed in a chapel on the islet Inchagoill in Lough Corrib; thence it was brought to the Elder Isles by a monk named Sisembert through fear of the pagans, and now it is deemed to be in secret custody: in a mysterious place to be dared only by the most gallant or the most foolhardy!"

King Casmir had been listening to the conversation with half an ear. Now he turned, to stand with his back to the window, his face showing cynical amusement. Queen Sollace turned him an inquiring look, but King Casmir seemed to have nothing to say. She turned back to Father Umphred.

"If only we could assemble a brotherhood of noble paladins, devoted to the service of their queen! I would send them forth on a quest of glory, with all honour for him who succeeded in the enterprise!"

"It is an excellent scheme, Your Highness! It fires the imagination!"

"And then, should we secure the Grail, I would feel that my life's effort had been well spent!"

"It is undoubtedly the finest relic of all."

"Surely we must obtain it for our own! The glory of our cathedral would resound across all Christendom."

"Quite true, my dear lady! The vessel is a very good relic, very fine indeed. Pilgrims would come from afar to marvel, to pray, to bless the saintly queen who ordained the great church!"

King Casmir could tolerate no more. He took a step forward. "I have heard

enough foolish prattle!" He jerked his thumb toward the priest. "Go! I wish to speak with the queen!"

"Just so, Your Highness!" Father Umphred gathered up his gown and took his portly figure briskly from the parlour. He turned aside at once, into a dressing room adjacent to the parlour. After a quick look over his shoulder, he stepped into a closet and removed a small plug in the wall, which allowed him to hear all that went on.

Casmir's voice came from near at hand. "-the facts, and they cannot be disputed. Madouc is a changeling; her mother a fairy; her father is some nameless rogue

of the forest. She flatly refuses a connection with Brezante, and I see no practical way to enforce my wishes."

Sollace spoke with emotion: "That is insolence in the extreme! You have already invited King Milo and his queen to Haidion, and Prince Brezante as well!"

"Unfortunately true. It will do no harm to entertain them; still, it is a vexation."

"I am indignant! The little hussy should not be allowed her victory!"

King Casmir grimaced and shrugged. "Were she of ordinary blood, she would

be grieving at this very moment. But her mother is a fairy, and I dare not test her spells. That is simple practicality."

Queen Sollace spoke hopefully: "If she were baptized and instructed in holy matters-"

King Casmir cut her short. "We tried that before. The scheme is inept."

"I suppose that you are right; still-but no matter."

Casmir pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. "I am cursed with problems! They swarm at me in a plague, each more dismal than the others, save only

for the most carking of all, which gnaws at me night and day!"

"Which problem is that?"

"Can you not imagine? It is the mystery of Suldrun's child."

Queen Sollace gave Casmir an uncomprehending stare. "Is it such a desperate problem? I have long put the matter from my head."

"Do you not remember the case? Suldrun's first-born son was taken and and we were given a bratling."

"Of course I remember; what of that?"

"The mystery remains! Who is the other child? He is the subject of Persilian's prophecy; still I know neither his name nor where he bides. He will sit rightfully at Cairbra an Meadhan and rule from Evandig. That is Persilian's gist."

"The force by now may have waned."

"The force of such predictions never wane, until they are fulfilled-or circumvented! If I knew the child's name, I could work some sort of ploy and safeguard the realm."

"There are no clues to the case?"

"None. He was born a boy, and now he



will be the same age as Madouc. That is all I know; I would pay dearly to learn the rest!"

"The time is long past," said Sollace.

"There is no one now to remember. Why not solicit a more favorable prophecy?"

Casmir gave a sad sick chortle. "It is not so easy to befuddle the Norns." He went to sit on the couch. "Now, despite all, I must entertain King Milo. He will be expecting a betrothal. How shall I explain that Madouc scorns his mooncalf of a son?"

Queen Sollace gave a throaty exclamation. "I have the answer!

Madouc can still serve to advantage- perhaps even better than before!"

"How so?"

"You heard us discuss our need for holy relics. Let us proclaim that whoever goes forth on a quest and returns with an authenticated relic, then he can expect a rich reward! Should he bring back the Holy Grail itself, he can demand a great boon from the king, even to the hand of the Princess Madouc herself!"

Casmir started to ridicule the idea, then closed his mouth. There was, so he reflected, nothing inherently wrong with the proposal. If pilgrims brought gold; if

relics brought pilgrims; if Madouc-even indirectly-brought relics, then the concept was sound. Casmir rose to his feet. "I have no objections to the plan."

Queen Sollace said dubiously: "We may only be postponing the problem!"

"How so?"

"Assume that some gallant knight brought hither the Holy Grail and asked the boon of the Princess Madouc's hand in marriage, and the boon was granted, but Madouc proved intractable, as well she might. What then?"

"I will give away the little shrew. She

may choose either matrimony or servitude; it is all one to me; the problem at this point leaves our hands."

Sollace clapped her hands together. "So are solved all our problems!"

"Not all of them." Casmir rose to his feet and departed the chamber.

The next day, on the landing of the great staircase, King Casmir was accosted by Father Umphred. "Your Highness, I beg the favor of a few words with you, on a matter of importance."

Casmir looked the priest up and down. "What is it now?"

Father Umphred glanced to right and left to make sure that they would not be overheard. "Sire, during my tenure at Haidion as spiritual counsellor to Her Majesty, and what with my other duties, I have become privy to many events of greater or lesser importance. Such is the nature of my position."

Casmir gave a sour grunt. "As to this I have no doubt. You know more about my affairs than I do myself."

Father Umphred laughed politely. "Recently I have been given to understand that you are interested in Suldrun's first-born child."

King Casmir said sharply: "What of it?"

"I might be able to discover the name of this child, and his present domicile."

"How would you do this?"

"I cannot be sure at this exact moment. But there is more to the case than the information alone."

"Aha. You want something."

"I will not deny it. My great ambition is the Archbishopric of the Lyonesse Diocese. If I were to convert the King of Lyonesse to Christianity, there would be strong argument for my elevation to this

post at the next Synod of Cardinals at Rome."

Casmir scowled. "In short, if I become a Christian, you will tell me the name of Suldrun's child."

Father Umphred nodded and smiled. "In its ultimate essence, this is the case."

Casmir spoke in a voice ominously flat. "You are a sly devil. Have you ever been stretched on the rack?"

"No, Your Highness."

"You are bold to the edge of insouciance! Were it not that Queen

Sollace would never again give me peace, you would tell your tale without conditions, amidst gasps and squeals."

Father Umphred showed a sickly smile. "I intend no boldness and certainly no disrespect; indeed I hoped that Your Highness might take pleasure in my offer."

"Again: you are lucky that Queen Sollace is your sponsor! What is involved in conversion?"

"Simple baptism, and you must recite a few words of the litany."

"Ha hmm. It is no great thing." King



Casmir considered, then spoke in a harsh voice: "Nothing will be changed, by so much as an iota! Do not presume upon your success! You will control none of the church monies; all funds must be paid into and out of the royal exchequer, with not a farthing for the popes of Rome!"

Father Umphred bleated a protest. "Your Highness, this makes for unwieldy administration!"

"It also makes for honest archbishops. Further, I will tolerate no swarms of itinerant monks, coming like flies on the waft of carrion, to feast and make merry on public funds. Such vagabonds will be

whipped and seized into servitude, that they may do useful work."

"Your Highness!" cried Father Umphred aghast. "Some of these wandering priests are holy men of the first rank! They carry the Gospel to wild places of the world!"

"Let them wander on without pausing-to Tormous or Skorne or High Tartary, so long as I never see the bulge of their paunches nor the shine of their pates!"

Father Umphred heaved a sigh. "I am forced to agree; we will do what we can."

"Rejoice, priest!" said Casmir grimly.

"Today your luck is good! You have gained your bargain and eased your fat limbs away from the rack. Tell me now your information!"

"It must be verified," said Father Umphred smoothly. "I shall have it ready tomorrow, after the ceremony."

King Casmir turned and strode off to his chambers.

The following day at noon Casmir repaired to the Queen's small chapel. He stood silent while Father Umphred sprinkled him with holy water and recited phrases in unctuous Latin. Next, to Father Umphred's prompting, he

mumbled a Paternoster and a few phrases of litany. Thereupon, Father Umphred seized up a cross and advanced upon Casmir, the cross held high. "Down upon your knees, Brother Casmir! In humility and the full transports of your joy kiss the cross and dedicate your life to worshipful deeds and the glory of the Church!"

King Casmir spoke evenly: "Priest, guard your tongue! I brook no fools in my presence." He looked around the chapel and made a peremptory gesture to those who had attended the ceremony. "Leave us!"

The chapel was empty except for

Casmir, the priest, and Queen Sollace, whom Casmir now addressed. "My dear queen, it might be well if, for the nonce, you also took yourself apart."

Queen Sollace vented a large sniff. Rigid with resentful dignity, she marched from the chapel.

King Casmir turned to the priest. "Now then! Tell me what you know! If it is either false or foolish, you will languish long in the dark."

"Your Highness, here is the truth! Long ago a young prince was washed up on the beach, half-drowned, at the foot of Suldrun's garden. His name was Aillas,

who is now King of Troicinet and elsewhere. Suldrun bore him a son-he who was taken to the Forest of Tantrevalles for safety. There the son, whose name was Dhrun, was changed by the fairies for Madouc. Aillas was consigned to the oubliette but escaped by some means beyond my knowledge. Now he hates you passionately. His son, Prince Dhrun, holds you in no more affection."

Casmir listened slack-jawed. The information was far more surprising than he had expected. He muttered: "How is this possible? The son should be of an age with Madouc!"

"The child Dhrun bided a year in the fairy shee, as reckoned in human time. But this year equalled seven years or more of halfling time! So is resolved the paradox."

Casmir made a series of soft grunting sounds. "Do you have proof of what you say?"

"I have no proof."

Casmir did not press the point. There were facts in his possession which had long puzzled him: why, for instance, had Ehirme, Suidrun's one-time servitor, been spirited away to Troicinet with all her family and there endowed with a

rich estate? Even more baffling was a fact which had caused a thousand marvelling conjectures: how could Aillas be so near in age to his son Dhrun? Now, all was explained.

The facts were just and true. Casmir said in a heavy voice: "Speak nothing of this, into any ears whatever! It must be known only to me!"

"Your Highness has spoken and I will obey!"

"Go."

Father Umphred hurried importantly from the chapel. Casmir stood gazing



unseeingly toward the cross on the wall, which meant no more to him now than yesterday. He spoke to himself: "Aillas hates me well!" Then, in a voice even more soft: "And it is Dhrun who will sit at Cairbra an Meadhan-before his death. So be it! He shall so sit and he will rule from the throne Evandig, if it is only to send a page off for a kerchief. But so, before his death, shall he sit and so shall he rule."

## VII

Evening came to Haidion Castle. King Casmir, sitting alone in the Great Hall of the Old Tower, took an austere supper of

cold beef and ale. Upon finishing his meal, he swung about, to sit gazing into the fire. He sent his memory back across the years. Images fled and flickered: Suldrun as a golden-haired child; Suldrun as he had last seen her: woebegone but still defiant. Presently he glimpsed the haggard youth he had dropped with such bleak fury into the oubliette. Time blurred the drawn white face, but now it wore the semblance of a young Aillas. So it had been! How Aillas must hate him! What yearnings for sweet revenge must control the mind of Aillas!

Casmir gave a soft dismal grunt. Recent events must now be considered from a

new perspective. Aillas, by assuming sovereignty over North and South Ulfiand, had thwarted Casmir in his goals, and had only just done so again in connection with Blaloc. What artful dissimulation Aillas and Dhrun had used during their visit! How blandly they had urged pacts of peace, all the while despising him and conspiring for his doom!

Casmir pulled himself up in his chair. It was now time for counterblows, harsh and definite, though still controlled, as always, by prudence; Casmir was not one to indulge in rash acts which might react against his own best interests. At the same time, he must discover a

method by which the prophecy of Persilian could be voided and its meaning vitiated.

Casmir sat ruminating, weighing his options and reckoning the value of each. Clearly, if Aillas were dead, Casmir's interests must be advanced. In such a case, Dhrun would become king. At this juncture, so Casmir reasoned, a colloquy at Avallon could easily be arranged, on one pretext or another. Dhrun would be seated at Cairbra an Meadhan and somehow persuaded to issue an order from the throne Evandig. The rest would be routine: a movement in the shadows, a glint of steel, a sad cry, a body on the floor-and Casmir would pursue his goals

free of fear and almost unopposed.

The plan was straightforward and logical, and needed only implementation.

First: the death of Aillas must be effectuated, but within the constraints of prudence. Assassination of a king is a risky affair, and a bungled attempt usually leaves a clear trail to the instigator, which would not be advantageous.

A name entered Casmir's mind as if by its own force. Torqual.

Casmir pondered at some length.

Torqual's qualifications were superb, but he was not easily controlled. In fact, he was not to be controlled at all.

Torqual often seemed as much enemy as ally, and barely troubled to maintain a cynical pretense of cooperation.

With regret, Casmir put aside the name 'Torqual'. Almost immediately another name entered his mind, and this time Casmir leaned back in his seat, nodding thoughtfully to himself and feeling no misgivings whatever. The name was 'Sir Cory of Falonges'<sup>11</sup> and it referred to a man more or less of Torqual's stripe. Sir Cory's willing cooperation, however, could be taken for granted, since he now crouched deep in a dungeon under the

Peinhador awaiting the stroke of Zerling's axe. By acceding to King Casmir's wishes, Sir Cory, so it seemed, had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Casmir signalled to the footman who stood by the door. "Fetch me Sir Erls."

Sir Erls, Chancellor of State and one of Casmir's most trusted advisers, shortly entered the hall: a small sharp-eyed sharp featured person of middle age, with fine silver hair and pale ivory skin. Casmir had no great liking for the fastidious Sir Erls. However, Sir Erls served him with punctilious efficiency, and Casmir ignored all else.

Casmir indicated a chair; Sir Erls, after a stiff bow, seated himself. Casmir asked: "What do you know of Sir Cory, who rests in the Peinhador?"

Sir Erls spoke with instant facility, as if he had expected the question. "Cory is second son to Sir Claunay of Falonges, now dead. The first son, Sir Camwyd, took the estate, which is to the north of Western Province in the Troagh, close under the Ulf border. Cory could not adapt to the plight of the second son, and tried to murder Sir Camwyd. During the night a dog howled; Sir Camwyd was wakeful and the deed was aborted. Cory became a fugitive, then an outlaw. He ranged the Troagh and conducted



ambushes along Old Street. He was captured by Duke Ambryl, who would have hanged him out of hand had not Cory declared himself one of Your Majesty's secret agents. Ambryl stayed his hand and sent Cory here for your own disposition. He is said to be a person of good address, if a black-hearted scoundrel, ripe for Zerling's axe. That is the sum of my knowledge."

"Perhaps Sir Cory used a premonition after all," said Casmir. "Have him brought here at once."

"As Your Majesty commands." Sir Ens' voice was carefully toneless. He left the hall. In due course a pair of jailers

brought Cory of Falonges into the hall, with chains at his wrists and a rope around his neck.

Casmir inspected Cory with cool interest. Cory was of middle stature, strong and agile, with a stocky torso, long sinewy arms and legs. His complexion was sallow, his hair dark, his features heavy and hard. He wore the garments in which he had been captured; originally of good quality, they were now torn and bedraggled and stank abominably of the dungeon.

Nevertheless he returned King Casmir's inspection with incurious composure: alive and alert but resigned to his fate.

The jailers tied one end of the rope to a table leg, so that Cory might not spring unexpectedly upon King Casmir, then, at Casmir's nod, they retired from the hall.

Casmir spoke in an even voice: "You informed Duke Ambryl that you worked in my secret service."

Cory gave a nod of the head. "So I did, Your Highness."

"Was not that a bold remark to make?"

"Under the circumstances, I prefer to think it an inspiration of the moment. It illuminates my resourceful intelligence and indicates my desire to put myself

and my skills at your service."

Casmir smiled his cold smile. "You had not previously made these ambitions clear."

"True, Sire! I have postponed the act too long, and now you discover me in shackles, to my shame."

"Shame for your crimes, or shame for your failure?"

"I can only say, Sire, that I am not accustomed to failure."

"Ha! That, at least, is a quality which I admire. Now then, as to employment in

my service: it may be a game you shall play in earnest."

"Willingly, Sire, since the work would seem to reprieve me from dungeon and axe."

"That is the case," said Casmir. "You are evidently both clever and unscrupulous; these are qualities which I often find valuable. If you succeed in the work I am about to propose, you shall not only have earned your amnesty but also a substantial reward."

Sir Cory bowed. "Your Majesty, without hesitation I commit myself to your mission."

Casmir nodded. "Let us be clear at the outset. If you betray me, I will hunt you down with all my resources and bring you back to the Peinhador."

Again Sir Cory bowed. "Sire, as a realist I would expect nothing else. Tell me only what I must do."

"The deed is simple enough. You must kill King Aillas of Troicinet, Dascinet and the Ulflands. He is now at sea with his navy, but you will presently find him at Doun Darnic, in South Ulfiand. I must not be implicated in the work."

Cory compressed his lips and his eyes glittered in the torch light. "It is a

delicate task, but not beyond my skill."

"That is all for tonight. Tomorrow we will speak again. Guards!"

The jailers entered the room. "Take Sir Cory back to the Peinhador; allow him to bathe, provide him fresh garments, feed him as he chooses and house him securely on the first level."

"As you wish, Sire. Come along, dog's-body."

Cory spoke haughtily: "Henceforth, address me as 'Sir Cory', or beware my displeasure!"

The jailer gave a sharp tug on the rope. "Whatever your name, be quick about it; we are not as clement as His Majesty."

Later in the afternoon of the next day King Casmir once again interviewed Sir Cory, this time in the Room of Sighs, above the armoury. Sir Cory was now dressed decently and came unshackled. King Casmir sat at his usual place, with the beechwood flagon and the beechwood wine cup ready at hand. He motioned Sir Cory to a bench.

"I have made certain arrangements," said Casmir. "On the table is a purse, containing twenty forms of silver. Fit yourself out as a merchant of medicinal



ointments, with a horse, a pack animal and suitable stockin-trade. Fare north along the Sfer Arct to Dazleby, proceed to Nolsby Sevan, then north along the Ulf Passway. You will negotiate the Gates of Cerberus and Kaul Bocach the fortress; continue six miles beyond to a wayside inn showing the sign of the Dancing Pig. There you will find four men awaiting you-blackguards as deep-dyed as yourself, if not worse. They were destined to join Torqual's band, but first they will assist you in your endeavour. You shall use them as you think best."

Casmir looked at a list, then spoke with distaste. "This is an unusual group! Each

would seem to exceed all the others combined for sheer villainy. First, I cite you Izmael the Hun, from the woods of Tartary. Next is Kegan the Celt, who is as thin as a ferret and no less avid for blood. Next: Este the Sweet, with curling golden hair and a limpid smile. He is Roman and claims kinship with the house of Ovid the poet. He carries a frail bow, like a toy, and shoots arrows which seem little more than slivers, but he can put out a man's eye at a far distance. Last is Galgus the Black, who carries four knives at his belt. Such are your paladins."

"They would seem, rather, creatures out of a nightmare," said Cory. "Will they do

my bidding?"

Casmir smiled. "So I hope. They fear Torqual, certainly. He may be the only man alive who daunts them. For this reason you must act in Torqual's name. There is a secondary benefit; when you are successful, as I hope, Torqual will be blamed for the deed and not I."

"How will Torqual regard this project?"

"He will make no objection. I reiterate: my name must never be used. Is all clear to you?"

"Except as to a single point: am I required to work under Torqual's

orders?"

"Only if it eases your task."

Cory pulled thoughtfully at his long chin. He asked: "May I speak with full candour?"

"So far we have done little else. Speak!"

"I have heard rumours that your secret agents seldom survive to enjoy the fruits of their toil. How am I guaranteed that I will live to enjoy my success?"

"I can answer only in these terms," said Casmir. "If you have served me capably once, I may well desire that you serve

me again, which you will not be able to do if you are dead. Secondly, if you distrust the arrangements, you have the option of returning to the Peinhador."

Cory smiled and rose to his feet. "Your arguments are cogent."

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## I

On Lally Meadow, well within the Forest of Tantrevalles, was the manse Trilda: a structure of timber and stone situated where Lillery Rill emerged from the forest on its way to join the Sweet Yallow River at the far end of the meadow.

Trilda, now almost a hundred years old, had been constructed to the order of the magician Hilario, whose previous residence had been Sheur Tower, on an islet off the north coast of Dahaut: a

place too rude, cold and cramped for Hilario, a person of discriminating tastes. With great care he drew up his plans, specifying each detail with precision and reviewing at length the relationship between each part and the whole. To perform the work of construction, he hired a troop of goblin carpenters, who declared themselves to be highly qualified craftsmen. Hilario started to discuss the plans with Shylick the master carpenter, but Shylick took the plans from Hilario, glanced through them, and seemed to assimilate everything at a glance, and Hilario was much impressed by his perspicacity.

The carpenters set to work immediately;

with remarkable zeal they dug, delved, hewed and sawed, hammered and pounded, fretted, fitted, and spun long shavings from their boggles<sup>12</sup>, so that, to Hilario's astonishment, the work was finished overnight, complete to a black iron weathercock on the chimney. As the first red rays of sunlight entered Lally Meadow, Shylick the master carpenter wiped the sweat from his forehead. With a grand flourish he presented his reckoning to Hilario, with a request for immediate payment, since the troop had urgent business elsewhere.

Hilario, however, was a man of cautious temperament, and was not to be influenced by Shylick's engaging



mannerisms. He commended Shylick for his briskness and efficiency, but insisted upon inspecting the premises before paying off the account. Shylick protested, to no avail, and with poor grace accompanied Hilario as he made his inspection.

Almost at once Hilario discovered several mistakes in the work, and evidence of over-hasty or even slipshod methods. The contract called for masonry of 'sound, substantial blocks of fieldstone'; the blocks inspected by Hilario proved to be simulations prepared from enchanted cow droppings. Checking further, Hilario found that the 'stout timbers of well-

seasoned oak' described in his specifications were in fact dried milkweed stalks of little strength, disguised by another crafty enchantment.

Hilario indignantly pointed out these deficiencies to Shylick and demanded that the work be done properly, to exact standards. Shylick, now glum and out of sorts, did his best to evade the extra toil. He argued that total precision was impossible and unknown to the cosmos. He claimed that a reasonable and realistic person accepted a degree of latitude in the interpretation of his contract, since this looseness was inherent in the communicative process.

Hilario remained inflexible and Shylick became ever more excited, striking at the floor with his tall green hat, and his arguments ever more abstruse. He stated that since the distinction between 'seeming' and 'substance' was in any case no more than a philosophical nicety, almost anything was equivalent to almost anything else. Hilario said gravely: "In that case, I will pay off my account with this bit of straw."

"No," said Shylick. "That is not quite the same thing." He went on to assert that if only for the sake of simplicity, Hilario should pay the account and contentedly take up residence in his new abode.

Hilario would not be persuaded. He termed Shylick's arguments pure sophistry, from beginning to end. "The manse presents a fine appearance, granted," said Hilario. "But enchantments of this sort are fugitive and tend to erode!"

"Not always!"

"Often enough! With the first good rain the entire jackleg contraption might collapse around my ears, perhaps in the middle of the night while I lay sleeping. You must do the work over, from start to finish, using standard materials and approved methods of construction."

The carpenters grumbled but Hilario had his way and work commenced again. For three days and nights the goblins toiled, and this time-from petulance or perhaps sheer perversity-they did the work twice as well as was needful, using rosewood, madura and choice walnut burl for the panelling; rhodocrosite, pink porphyry and malachite in the place of marble: all the while glaring sidewise at Hilario as if daring him to find fault.

At last the work was finished and Hilario paid off his account with two hundred and twelve cockleshells and a feast of pickled fish, fresh-baked bread, new cheese, nuts and honey, a tub of strong pear cider and another of

mulberry wine; and the transaction ended on a note of good-fellowship and mutual esteem.

Hilario took up residence and lived many years at Trilda, eventually dying of inexplicable causes out on Lally Meadow. Perhaps the victim of a lightning bolt. Though, according to rumour, he had excited the resentment of the wizard Tamurello. In any case, nothing could be proved.

The manse remained empty for a number of years, until one day Shimrod, during his wanderings, came upon the lonely structure and decided to make it his own home. He added a wing for his

workroom, planted flowers at the front and an orchard at the back, and Trilda was soon as charming as ever.

To maintain Trilda: to dust, mop and tidy, to polish the glass, wax the wood, weed the gardens and tend the fires, Shimrod engaged a family of merrihews (sometimes known as tree trolls) recently arrived in the neighborhood. These were small shy creatures who worked only when Shimrod's back was turned, so that he seldom noticed them except as a flicker of movement from the side of his eye.

The years went by, after the established cycle. Shimrod lived at Trilda for the

most part in solitude, with only his work to distract him. Few folk came to Lally Meadow; perhaps an occasional woodcutter or mushroom-gatherer; and Shimrod entertained virtually no one. At the other end of the meadow was Tuddifot Shee: to the casual eye an outcropping of black trap, stained on the north side with lichen. From time to time Shimrod watched the fairies at their revels, but always from afar. Already he had learned that the society of fairies could lead to turmoils of bittersweet frustration.

Recently, at Murgan's behest, Shimrod had undertaken a monumental task: the analysis and classification of material



confiscated from the wizard Tamurello and brought to Trilda as a disorganized clutter. Tamurello had been a magician of great scope and electric experience; he had collected from near and far a great number of objects and magical adjuncts: some trivial, others quivering with force.

Shimrod's first task, in connection with this wonderful miscellaneity, was to make a cursory survey of documents, tracts, formularies and records. These were presented in many shapes, sizes and conditions. There were books old and new, scrolls from times beyond memory, illuminated parchments; portfolios of drawings, plans, maps and

charts; cloth panels stamped with block characters, papers inscribed in odd-colored inks in languages even more arcane.

Shimrod sorted these articles into piles for future study, and began to examine the machines, tools, utensils, enhancers and assorted other artifacts. Many showed no obvious utility, and Shimrod frequently puzzled as to their purpose or, conversely, their lack of purpose. For a month he had been studying such a contrivance: an assembly of seven disks of transparent material, rolling around the periphery of a circular tablet of black onyx. The disks swam with soft colors, and showed pulsing black spots

of emptiness, forming and dying apparently at random.

Shimrod could conceive no practical purpose for the device. A clock? A toy? A curio? So complicated a machine, he reasoned, must have been constructed with a definite purpose in mind, though this purpose quite escaped his understanding.

One day as he sat watching the disks, a chime issued from a large bulging mirror hanging on the end wall.

Shimrod rose to his feet and approached the mirror, to find himself looking into the Great Hall at Swer Smod. Murgan

stood by the table. He acknowledged Shimrod's attention with a nod and spoke without preliminaries. "I have a complicated task to lay before you. It might well involve you in personal danger. Still, it is of great importance and must be accomplished. Since I cannot take time to do this work, it falls upon your shoulders."

"That is the reason for my being," said Shimrod. "What is the task?"

"In the main, it is a continuation of your previous work at Ys. You now must pursue your investigations in greater detail. Specifically, you must learn the facts in regard to Desmei."

"You have no theories?"

"I have guesses by the dozen; facts none. The best possibilities are very few; in fact, as I reckon it, they number two only."

"And they are?"

"We start with this supposition. When Desmei created Melancthe and Carfilhiot she dissolved herself totally as a dramatic demonstration of spite toward the race of men. The qualification here is that no one would truly care-Tamurello least of all. As a more likely case, she chose to alter her state, that she might bide her time, and

take revenge when the opportunity arose. With that as your premise, you are to discover the node of green taint which is Desmei-or whatever semblance she is using. Where is her hiding place? What is her scheme? I suspect that her agents are Melanthe and Torqual; if so, they will lead you to Desmei."

"So then-how should I proceed?"

"First, alter your semblance, and definitely; Melanthe perceived you through the last. Then travel to the high moors of Ulfland. Under Mount Sobh in Glen Dagach is High Coram; there you will find Melanthe and Torqual."

"And when I find Desmei?"

"Destroy her-unless first she destroys you."

"That is a contingency I would regret."

"Then you must arm yourself well. You cannot use sandestin magic; she would sniff you out on the instant, since the green comes from demonland."

"In that case, I am vulnerable to demon magic."

"Not altogether. Hold out your hand."

Shimrod did so, and at once found in his

palm a pair of small black bloodstone spheres, each joined by a short chain to an earring. "These are the hither projections of two Mang Seven effrits. They dislike all things from both Mel and Dadgath. Their names are Voner and Skel; you will find them useful. Now make your preparations, then I will give you further instructions."

The mirror went blank; Shimrod saw only his own face. He turned away and considered his workbench, with its burden of oddments and mysteries. He watched the whirl of the seven careening disks and gave a soft grunt of vexation. He should have put a question to Murgan.



The time was early afternoon. Shimrod went out into his garden. High in the sky tumbles of cloud dreamed in the sunlight. Never had Lally Meadow seemed more tranquil. Shimrod turned his mind to Glen Dagach, where tranquillity would certainly be unknown. But there was no help for it. What needed doing must be done.

Now he must fit himself into a semblance suited to the place and circumstances. With his usual magic denied to him, he must rely upon physical skills and weaponry. Some of these were native to him; others he must now absorb. He considered his new semblance. It must be strong, durable,

quick, competent, yet not conspicuous in the environment of the high moors.

Shimrod returned to his workroom, where he formulated an entity which more than fulfilled the requirements: a man tall, spare of physique, with a body that seemed to be based upon leather, sinew and bone. The head was narrow, with a keen hollow-cheeked face, glittering yellow eyes, a cruel underslung cleft of a mouth, and an axe-blade nose. Ringlets of coarse dull-brown hair curled close to his scalp; his skin, weathered and sun-beaten, showed the same color. To the lobes of the small ears Shimrod hung the effrits Voner and Skel. At once he heard their voices; they

seemed to be discussing the weather in places beyond his acquaintance: "- almost a record cycle for interstitials, at least along the upper miasma," said Skel. "However, just past the kickfield of the Living Dead the modules have not yet shifted phase."

"I know little of Carpiskovy," said Voner. "It is said to be very fine and I am surprised to hear of conditions so insipid."

"Margaunt is worse, and by the hour! I found a delicate bang green along the flutterway."

" 'Delicate', you say!"

"No less! The gray-pines are on regular duty, and there is never a tweak from the rubants."

Shimrod spoke. "Gentlemen, I am your supervisor. My name is Shimrod; however in this phase, I will use the name Travec the Dacian. Be on the alert for plans made against either Shimrod or Travec. I am pleased that you will be associated with me, since our business is of great importance. Now, for the moment I must ask you to keep silent, since I must assimilate much information into my mind."

Skel said, "You have made a poor beginning, Shimrod or Travec, whatever

your name. Our conversation is on a high level. You would do well to listen."

Shimrod spoke sternly: "I have a limited mind. I insist upon obedience. Let us be clear on this at once; otherwise I must consult Murgan."

"Bah!" said Voner. "Just our luck! In Shimrod we discover another of these short-tail snatch-after martinets!"

"Silence, if you please!"

"Just so, if so it must be," said Voner.  
"Skel, I will speak with you later, when Shimrod is less testy."

"By all means! The time cannot pass too swiftly, as they say in this eccentric universe."

The effrits became silent save for occasional groans and mutters. Shimrod, meanwhile, formulated a biography for Travec and stocked his mind with pertinent information. Next, he established safeguards to protect Trilda from interlopers during his absence. An ironic circumstance if while he searched the moors for Desmei, she came to Trilda and plundered his work room of all its precious adjuncts!

Shimrod's preparations at last were complete. He went to the mirror and

made himself known to Murgan. "I am ready to depart on my mission."

Murgan inspected the unfamiliar image that confronted him. "The semblance is adequate, if somewhat larger in impact than necessary. Still, who knows? It might prove useful. Now then: go six miles past Kaul Bocach on the Ulf Passway. Here you will find the Inn of the Dancing Pig."

"I know this inn."

"You will discover four cutthroats on the premises. They are awaiting orders from King Casmir. Let it be known that King Casmir has sent you to join the group,

and that a certain Cory of Falonges will shortly arrive to serve as their leader on a special mission."

"So far all is clear."

"You should have no difficulty in attaching yourself to Cory's band. His orders are to assassinate King Aillas and, if possible, to capture Prince Dhrun.

"Cory will lead this company to Glen Dagach. Here, depending upon circumstances, you might transfer from Cory's band to that of Torqual. But move quietly and excite no one. At the moment Desmei feels no suspicion. Do not



blunder and drive her into far hiding."

Shimrod nodded. "And thereafter: what of Cory?"

"He becomes inconsequential." The mirror went blank.

## II

Travec the Dacian rode a hammer-headed dun horse north along the Great Ulf Passway. To the right of his saddle a lacquered box contained a short compound bow and two dozen arrows; at his left side hung a long scimitar, somewhat narrow-bladed, in a leather scabbard. He wore a black cloth shirt,

loose trousers and knee-length black boots. A cloak, a chin-mail shirt and a conical iron helmet were tied in a roll behind the saddle.

He rode slouched forward, eyes flickering constantly from side to side. Weapons, garments, and general mien identified Travec as a vagabond warrior or perhaps something worse. The folk he met along the way gave him a wide berth and saw him pass with relief.

Travec had ridden almost six miles beyond the fortress Kaul Bocach. On the left rose the mighty Teach tac Teach; to the right the Forest of Tantrevalles bordered the road, approaching some

times so closely that branches shaded away the sky. Ahead, a small wayside inn showed the sign of the Dancing Pig.

Travec drew up his horse; at once a querulous question came from one of the black bloodstone globes at his ear:

"Travec, why do you halt your horse?"

"Because the Inn of the Dancing Pig is close ahead."

"Surely that is a matter of no concern."

Not for the first time Travec reflected upon Murgan's hints that the effrits might not be the easiest of companions. During the whole of the journey, to while away

the tedium, they had conversed in soft voices, creating an undertone of sound which Travec ignored to the best of his ability. Now he said: "Listen well! I am about to instruct you."

"That is unnecessary," said Voner.

"Your instructions are beside the mark."

"How so?"

"Is it not clear? Murgan gave orders that we were to serve Shimrod. You name your name 'Travec'. The disparity must be obvious, even to you."

Travec uttered a grim laugh. "One moment, if you please! 'Travec' is

merely a name-an item of verbiage. I am in every essential aspect Shimrod. You must serve me to your best capacity. If you make a single objection, I will complain to Murgan, who will then chastise you without mercy."

Skel spoke in unctuous tones: "All is explained. You need fear nothing; we are on full alert."

Voner said: "Still, if only for a review, list once again the contingencies against which we must guard."

"First, warn me of all imminent danger, including but not limited to ambush, poison in my wine, weapons pointed in

my direction that are intended to injure or kill me; also rockslides, avalanches, pitfalls, snares, traps of all kinds, and any other sort of device or activity which might annoy, thwart, hurt, imprison, kill or debilitate me. In short, ensure my safety and good health. If you are at all doubtful as to my meaning, act always in the manner which will provide me the maximum satisfaction. Is that clear?"

Voner asked: "What of doses, or double, or triple-doses of aphrodisiac?"

"All such dosages will ultimately be to my detriment. They are included in the full category. If you have doubts, consult

me."

"As you like."

"Second-"

"Is there more?"

Travec paid no heed. "Second, notify me when you sense the green fume of Xabiste. We will then try to locate the source and destroy the node."

"That is sensible enough."

"Third, do not reveal yourselves to the demons of Xabiste, or Dadgath, or elsewhere. They might flee before we are able to kill them."

"Just as you wish."

"Fourth, be on the lookout for the witch Desmei, in any of her phases. She might even use another name, but do not be confused! Report any suspicious circumstance at once."

"We will do our best"

Travec once more set his horse into motion, and proceeded along the road, while the effrits discussed the terms of Travec's instructions, which they seemed to find perplexing, so that Travec wondered if they had grasped the full sense of his requirements.



Travec, approaching the inn, discovered it to be a rather ramshackle structure, built of rough timber and roofed with thatch so old that grass grew from the straw. At one side was a shed where the landlord brewed his ale; at the back the inn joined into the barn. Beyond, three small children worked in an acreage planted to oats and pot-herbs. Travec turned into the yard, dismounted and tied his horse to a rail. Nearby two men sat on a bench: Izmael the Hun and Kegan the Celt, both of whom had watched Travec's arrival with keen interest.

Travec spoke to Izmael in his own language: "Well then, creature born of outrage: what do you here, so far from

home?"

"Hoy, dog-eater! I attend to my own affairs."

"They may be mine as well, so treat me kindly, even though I have lopped the heads from a hundred of your kinsmen."

"What is done is done; after all, I raped your mother and all your sisters."

"And no doubt your own mother as well, on horseback." Travec nodded toward the other man on the bench. "Who is this gaunt shadow of a dead scorpion?"

"He calls himself Kegan; he is a Celt

from Godelia. He would as soon cut your throat as spit."

Travec nodded and reverted to the language of the country. "I have been sent to meet a certain Cory of Falonges. Where is he to be found?"

"He has not yet arrived. We thought you might be Cory. What do you know of the venture?"

"I was assured of profit and danger, no more." Travec went into the inn, and found the landlord, who agreed to provide lodging, in the form of a straw pallet in the loft over the barn, which Travec accepted without enthusiasm.

The landlord sent a boy to take care of the dun horse; Travec brought his bundle of belongings into the inn, and commanded a pint of ale from the landlord, which he took to a table by the wall.

Nearby sat another two men: Este the Roman, slender with delicate features and hazel eyes, carved a bit of wood into the likeness of a harpy. Galgus the Black from Dahaut amused himself rolling dice across the table, from one hand to the other. He showed the startling white skin and lusterless black hair of an arsenic-eater; his face was sad and saturnine. The two were presently joined by Izmael and Kegan the Celt.

Izmael muttered a few words, and all turned to look toward Travec, who ignored the attention.

Kegan began to play at dice with Galgus, wagering small coins, and presently the whole group became involved in the game. Travec watched with somber attention, wondering as to the outcome of the situation. The group, lacking a leader, was unstable, with each man jealous of his reputation. After a few minutes Izmael the Hun called over to Travec. "Come! Why do you not join the sport? Dacians are notorious for their insensate gambling!"

"True, to my regret," said Travec. "But I

did not wish to join the game without an invitation."

"You may consider yourself invited. Gentlemen, this is Travec the Dacian, who is here on business similar to our own. Travec, you see here Este the Sweet, who claims to be the last true Roman. His weapon is a bow so small and fragile that it seems a toy, while his arrows are little more than slivers; still, he can sling them away with great speed and put out a man's eye at fifty yards without rising from his chair. Next is Galgus, who is Daut and clever with knives. Yonder sits Kegan from Godelia; he favors a set of curious weapons, among others, the steel whip. I myself

am a poor lost dove; I survive the ferocities of life only through the pity and forbearance of my fellows."

"You are a notable group," said Travec. "I am privileged to be associated with you. Does anyone know the details of our mission?"

Galgus said: "I can guess, since Casmir is at the bottom of it. But enough talk; let us roll the dice. Travec, do you understand the game?"

"Not altogether, but I will learn quickly enough."

"Then what about money?"

"No problem there! I carry ten gold pieces paid over to me by King Casmir."

"That should suffice! Very well; I will roll the dice. Everyone must wager, then I either call out my number of 'odd' or 'even', and so goes the game."

Travec played for a period, and won modestly. Then Galgus began to use false dice, which he substituted with great cleverness when it came his time to throw, and Travec lost his ten gold pieces. "I will play no more," said Travec. "Else I might find myself without a horse."

The sun had long since dropped behind



the mountains. As the sky began to grow dark the landlord served a supper of lentils and bread. Even as the five men finished their meal, a newcomer arrived at the inn, riding a fine black horse. He dismounted, tied his horse to the rail and strode into the inn: a dark-haired man of middle stature, long and sinewy of arm and leg, with a hard harsh face. He spoke to the landlord: "Take care of my horse and provide me the best your house can offer, since I have ridden far this day." He turned and surveyed the five men, then approached their table. "I am Cory of Falonges; I am here on orders from an eminent person of whom you know. It is my business to command you on a venture. I expected four men; I

find five."

"I am Travec the Dacian. King Casmir sent me to join your troop, along with a bag of ten gold pieces which you were to pay out to the other four men. However, this afternoon I gamed at dice. To my regret I lost all ten gold pieces, so that the men must go without their pay."

"What!" cried Izmael in consternation. "You gambled with my money?"

Cory of Falonges looked at Travec wonderingly. "How do you explain your behaviour?"

Travec shrugged. "I was pressed to join the game and Casmir's money was the first to hand. After all, I am a Dacian and accept all challenges."

Este looked accusingly at Galgus. "The money you have won is rightfully mine!"

"Not necessarily!" cried Galgus. "Your remark is based on a hypothesis. Also, let me ask this: if Travec had won, would you now reimburse me my losses?"

Cory spoke decisively: "Galgus in this case is not at fault; Travec is to blame."

Travec, seeing how the tide was running,

said: "You are all making much of nothing. I have five gold pieces of my own, which I will put up for wager."

Galgus asked: "You wish to gamble further?"

"Why not? I am a Dacian! But we will play a new game!" Travec put the earthenware bean-pot on the floor and indicated a crack running across the floor some fifteen feet from the pot.

"Each man in turn will stand behind the crack and toss a gold piece toward the pot. The man whose coin goes into the pot collects all the coins which have gone astray."

"And if two or more men succeed?"  
asked Este.

"They share the booty. Come then, who will play? Galgus, you are adept and a good judge of distances; you shall go first."

Somewhat dubiously Galgus put his toe to the crack and tossed a coin; it struck the side of the pot and rattled away.

"Too bad," said Travec. "You will not win this round. Who will go next? Este?"

Este tossed, then Izmael and Kegan; all their coins went wide of the opening,

though it seemed as if their aim were true and that only at the last instant did some influence nudge the coins aside. Travec threw last, and his coin rattled clean and true into the pot. "In this case I am lucky," said Travec. He collected his winnings. "Come; who will be first? Galgus again?"

Once more Galgus stepped to the crack and with the most subtle touch, tossed his coin, but it sailed entirely over the pot as if it had wings. Este's coin seemed to dip for a moment into the opening, then careen away. Izmael and Kegan likewise failed in their attempts, but as before Travec's coin rang into the pot as if drawn there by a will of its

own.

Travec collected his winnings. He counted out ten gold pieces and gave them to Cory. "Let there be no further complaint!" He turned to his fellows. "Shall we toss another round?"

"Not I," said Este. "My arm is sore from so much exercise."

"Nor I," said Kegan. "I am confused by the erratic flight of my coins. They dart and veer like barn swallows; they shy away from the pot as if it were a hole into Hell!"

Kegan went to look into the pot. A black

arm reached up from within and tweaked his nose. He gave a startled cry and dropped the pot, which broke into a hundred pieces. None had observed the incident and his explanations met with skepticism. Travec said: "The landlord's ale is strong! No doubt you felt its influence!"

The landlord now came forward. "Why did you break my valuable pot? I demand payment!"

"It is your pot which tonight cost me dear!" roared Kegan. "I will pay not so much as a falsified farthing, unless you recompense me my loss!"



Cory stepped forward. "Landlord, be calm! I am the leader of this company and I will pay the cost of your pot. Be good enough to bring us more ale, then leave us in peace."

With a sullen shrug the landlord retreated and in due course returned with mugs of ale. Meanwhile, Cory had turned to appraise Travec. "You are deft with your coin-tossing. What other skills can you demonstrate?"

Travec showed a flicker of a smile. "Upon whom?"

"I stand aloof, in judgment," said Cory.

Travec looked around the group.  
"Izmael, your nerves are strong;  
otherwise the deeds you have done  
would have made you mad."

"That may well be true."

"Stand here, then, at this spot."

"Tell me first what you have in mind. If  
you intend to cut off my scalp-lock, I  
must respectfully refuse."

"Be calm! With as much amity as may be  
possible between Dacian and Hun, we  
will demonstrate the niceties of combat  
as we know it on the steppes."

"As you like." Izmael slouched to the stipulated place.

Cory turned to Travec. He asked sharply: "What sort of foolery is this? You carry neither bludgeon nor mace; there is no blade at your belt nor none in your boot!"

Travec, paying no heed, spoke to Izmael. "You are waiting in ambush. Make ready your knife, and strike as I walk past."

"As you like."

Travec walked past Izmael the Hun. There was a flurry of movement, almost too fast to follow. Travec flung out his

arm; a knife appeared miraculously in his hand; the pommel was pressed against Izmael's corded neck, with the blade gleaming in the lamplight. Izmael's arm was knocked aside; his knife clattered to the stone floor. At the same time he raised his leg, a horrid double-pronged blade protruding from the toe of his soft felt shoe. He kicked at Travec's crotch; Travec dropped his other hand and caught Izmael's ankle, and Izmael was forced to hop backward toward the fireplace; had Travec stepped forward and thrust, Izmael would have fallen backward into the blaze.

Travec, however, released Izmael's ankle and resumed his seat. Izmael

stolidly picked up his knife and retreated to his own place. "So go events on the steppe," said Izmael without rancor.

Este the Sweet spoke in silky tones: "That is deft knifework, and even Galgus, who reckons himself supreme, will agree to this. Am I right, Galgus?"

All eyes turned to Galgus, who sat brooding, his pallid face pinched into a dyspeptic mask. "It is easy to be deft when one has a knife in his sleeve," said Galgus. "As to the thrown knife, that is an art superb at which I excel."

Este asked: "What of it, Travec? Can you throw the knife?"

"By Dacian standards I am considered moderately skillful. Which of us is the better man? There is no way of proving without one or the other or both taking the knife in the throat, so let us not force a comparison."

"Ah, but there is a way," said Galgus. "I have seen it used often at a trial among champions. Landlord, bring us a length of thin cord."

Grudgingly the landlord tendered a hank of string. "You must now pay me a silver bit, which will also compensate me for my pot."

Cory contemptuously tossed him a coin.

"Take this and cease your whining! Avarice ill becomes a landlord; these folk, as a class, should be generous, decent and open-handed."

"None such exist," growled the landlord. "All answering that description have become wandering paupers."

Galgus meanwhile had tied the cord across the face of a horizontal six-foot baulk at the far end of the room. At the center he suspended a beef knucklebone upon which the dogs had been chewing, then returned to where his comrades stood watching.

"Now then," said Galgus. "We stand at

this crack, facing away from the string. At the signal, we turn and throw our knives. Travec aims at the string two feet to the right of the bone; I aim at a point two feet to the left. Should we both strike the string, one knife will cut an instant sooner than the other, and the bone will swing somewhat away from vertical before it falls and thus give a clear indication of which knife struck first that is, if either of us has the competence to hit the mark in the first place."

"I can only try my best," said Travec. "First I must find a knife to throw, as I would not wish to use my sleeve-knife for such rough work." He looked about



the room. "I will try this old cheese-knife; it will serve as well as any."

"What?" exclaimed Galgus. "The blade is a trifle of pot-metal, or lead, or some other base substance; it is barely able to gnaw through an ounce of cheese!"

"Still, it must do, since I have no other. Este, you must referee the drop. Find the exact verticality, so that we may detect to the width of a spider-leg who is the better man."

"Very well." After several tests, Este marked a spot on the floor. "Here is the point of determination! Kegan, you come here as well; we will crouch and watch

the spot, and if the bone drops we will validate each other's decision."

Kegan and Este went to kneel under the knucklebone. "We are ready."

Galgus and Travec took their places by the crack, backs turned to the wooden baulk. Cory said: "I will rap my knuckles on the table with this cadence: one-two-three-four-five. At the fifth rap, you must turn and throw. Are you ready?"

"Ready!" said Galgus.

"Ready!" said Travec.

"Attention, then! I will start the count!" Cory rapped his knuckles upon the table. Rap. Rap. Rap. Rap. Rap. Galgus with the speed of a striking snake swung about; metal flashed through the air; the blade struck home in the wood. But the bone never wavered; the blade had entered the baulk at the target point but with its blade flat and parallel to the cord. Travec, who had turned in a leisurely manner, said: "That is not bad; but let me see if I cannot do better with this old cheese-biter." He hefted the wooden handle, slung it sidewise. The knife wavered through the air, slashed the cord; the bone fell to the side. Este and Kegan rose to their feet. "It appears

that on this occasion Travec must be declared the winner of the trial."

Galgus, muttering under his breath, went to retrieve his knife. Cory said abruptly: "Enough of these trials and tests; clearly you all are competent at slitting throats and drowning old women. Whether you can achieve more strenuous acts remains to be seen. Now then: seat yourselves, and give me all your attention, and I will tell you what I expect of you. Landlord, bring us ale, then step from the room, as we wish to make private conversation."

Cory waited until the landlord had obeyed his instructions, then, placing one foot on a bench, he spoke in a voice

of command. "At this moment we are a disparate group, with nothing in common but our mutual villainy and our greed. These are poor bonds, no doubt, but they must serve, since we have no other. It is important that we work as one; our mission will collapse into disaster for all of us unless we act with discipline."

Kegan called out: "What is this mission? This is what we need to know!"

"I cannot tell you the details at this time. I can describe it as dangerous, dastardly and in the interests of King Casmir-but you know this already, and perhaps you can guess what is wanted of us. Still, I prefer to avoid an exact definition of our

goal until we have proceeded somewhat further. But this I can tell you: if we succeed, we gain great rewards, and will never need to rob or plunder again, save for recreation."

Este asked: "All very well, but what are these rewards? A few more gold pieces?"

"Not so. As for myself, I will be restored to the barony of Falonges. Each of you may expect the rank and estate of a knight, in a district of your own choosing. Such, at least, is my understanding."

"Well then, what next?" asked Este.

"The program is simple: you need only obey my orders."

"That is, perhaps, a trifle too simple. After all, we are not fresh recruits."

"The details are these: tomorrow we set off across the mountains to a place of rendezvous with others of our ilk. There we shall take advice and perfect our plans. At last we shall act, and if we do our work with decision, we are done."

Galgus said sardonically: "Nothing could be more expeditious, as you explain it."

Cory paid him no heed. "Listen now to

me. My demands are few. I ask neither love, nor flattery, nor special favors. I require discipline and obedience to my commands, in exactitude. There must be no hesitant questions, nor arguments, nor murmuring doubts. You are as horrid a band of brutes as ever haunted a nightmare-but I am more vicious than all five together-if my orders are disobeyed. So then-here and now! Anyone who finds the program beyond his scope may take his leave; it is now or never! Travec, do you accept my regulations?"

"I am a Black Eagle of the Carpathians! No man is my master!"

"During this venture, I am your master.



Accept this fact, or go your own way."

"If all the others agree, I will abide by your regulations."

"Este?"

"I accept the conditions. After all, someone must lead."

"Exactly so. Izmael?"

"I will abide by the rule."

"Kegan?"

"Ha! If I must, I must, though the ghosts of my ancestors cry out at the indignity."

"Galgus?"

"I submit to your leadership."

"Travec the Dacian: once more to you?"

"You shall be the leader. I will not dispute your rule."

"That is still ambiguous. Once and for all, will you or will you not obey my command?"

Travec said stonily: "I will obey."

### **III**

An hour after daybreak Cory of Falonges

and his dreadful company departed the Inn of the Dancing Pig. Tern, the landlord's oldest son, served as their guide and led a pair of packhorses. He had stated that the journey would require two days only, barring untoward incident and provided that the Atlantic gales held off the full force of their blowing.

The column rode north, past the defile which led under Tac Tor into the Vale of Evander and beyond, then turned into a trail that led up a steep gulch. Back and forth wound the trail, among tumbled rocks, alder thickets, brambles and brakes of thistle, with a small river gushing and gurgling always near at

hand. After a mile, the trail left the river to climb the hillside, traversing back, forth, back, forth, to emerge at last on the upper face of a spur.

The company rested for a space, then continued: up the hump of the spur, across barrens of scree, through dells shaded under cedars and pines, along ridges with windy spaces to either side, then once more back against the base mass of the Teach tac Teach, to climb by laborious slants and switchbacks, to come out at last upon the high moors, to find the sun already behind the western cloud banks. In the shelter of thirteen tall dolmens, the company made camp for the night.

In the morning, the sun rose red in the east, while a wind from the west sent low clouds streaming across the moor. The company of adventurers huddled close around the fire, each thinking his own thoughts and toasting bacon on a spit, while porridge bubbled in the pot. The horses were brought up and saddled; the party, bending low to the chill wind, set off across the moor. Craggs of the Teach tac Teach, rearing high, one after the other in lonely isolation, dwindled away to right and left. Ahead rose Mount Sobh.

The trail had now disappeared; the company rode across the open moor, around the flanks of Mount Sobh, down

through a stand of stunted pines to where a sudden panorama burst open before them: ridges and slopes, dark valleys choked with conifers, then the low moors and a nondescript murk, where vision could no longer penetrate the distance. From somewhere a trail had once again appeared, slanting down the slope and into a forest of pines and cedars.

Something white glimmered ahead. The company, approaching, discovered the skull of an elk nailed to the trunk of a pine tree. At this point Tern pulled up his horse. Cory rode up beside him. "What now?"

"I go no farther," said Tern. "Behind the tree hangs a brass horn; blow three blasts and wait."

Cory paid him in silver coins. "You have guided us well; good luck to you."

Tern turned about and departed, leading his two packhorses. Cory surveyed his company. "Este of Rome! You are accounted a musician of sorts! Find the horn and send three good blasts ringing down the valley!"

Este dismounted and approached the tree, where he found a brass horn of three coils hanging on a peg. He put it to his lips and blew three sweet strong

tones which seemed to echo on and on.

Ten minutes passed. Travec sat his dun hammer-headed horse to the side, apart from the others. He muttered: "Voner! Skel! Do you hear me?"

"Naturally we hear you, quite as well as need be."

"Are you aware of this place?"

"It is a great up-fold in the mother-stuff of the world. A scurf of vegetation shades the sky. Three furtive scoundrels peer at us from the shadows."

"What of the green seep from Xabiste?"



"Nothing of consequence," said Voner.  
"A wisp from yonder declivity, no more."

"Not enough to excite our interest," said Skel.

Travec said: "Still, after this, alert me to any green taint whatever, since it might indicate a node of green."

"Just as you say. Should we make ourselves known and destroy yonder stuff?"

"Not yet. We must learn more of where and how it arises."

"As you like."

Behind Travec spoke a rasping voice; turning, Travec looked into the face of Kegan the Celt. "How gratifying must be the comfort of these intimate conversations with yourself!"

"I repeat my lucky slogans; what of that?"

"Nothing whatever," said Kegan. "I have foolish quirks of my own. I can never kill a woman without first uttering a prayer to the goddess Quincubile."

"That is only sensible. I see that Este's blasts have brought response."

From the forest came a yellow-haired yellow-bearded man, tall and massive, wearing a tricorn iron helmet, a chain shirt and black leather trousers. At his girdle hung three swords, of varying length. He called out to Cory in a great windy voice:

"Name your names and explain why you have sounded the horn."

"I am Cory of Falonges; I have been sent by a person of high rank to take counsel with Torqual. This is my company; the names will mean nothing to you."

"Does Torqual know of your coming?"

"I cannot say. It is possible."

"Follow behind me. Do not stray off the trail by so much as two yards measurement."

The company rode single file along a narrow track which led first through a dense forest, then along a barren mountainside, then up a gorge to a small stony flat, thence up a narrow spine of rock, with a steep declivity at either side, to come out at last upon a small meadow hard under a cliff. An ancient fortress, half in ruins, commanded the approach. "You stand on Neep Meadow, and there is High Coram Keep," said the blond outlaw. "You may dismount and

either stand to wait, or rest upon yonder benches. I will tell Torqual of your coming." He disappeared into the tumbled recesses of the old castle.

Travec dismounted with the others and looked about the meadow. Under the cliff several dozen rude huts had been laid up of stone and sod: here, presumably, were housed Torqual's followers. Within the huts Travec glimpsed a number of bedraggled women and several children playing in the dirt. To the side an oven for the baking of bread had been built of rough bricks, which apparently had been formed of meadow clay fired on the spot in open fires.

Travec went to look down Glen Dagach, which dropped steeply to open at last upon the lower moors. He spoke under his breath: "Voner! Skel! What of the green?"

"I notice a suffusion centered in the castle," said Voner. Skel added: "A tendril leads elsewhere."

"Can you see its source?"

'No.

"Are there other nodes of green?"

"There is such a node in Swer Smod; no others are obvious."

From the castle came Torqual, wearing the black garments of a Ska nobleman. He approached the newcomers. Cory stepped forward. "Torqual, I am Cory of Falonges."

"I know your reputation. You have scoured the Troagh like a ravening wolf, or so it is said. Who are these others?"

Cory made an indifferent gesture. "They are talented villains, and each is unique. That one, is Kegan the Celt. That is Este the Sweet, who might be the Roman he claims to be. There stands Travec the Dacian; there Galgus the Daut, and that misshapen wad of pure evil yonder is Izmael the Hun. They know two

motivations only: fear and avarice."

"That is all they need to know," said Torqual. "Any other I distrust. What is your errand?"

Cory took Torqual aside. Travec went to sit on the bench. He whispered: "Voner! Skel! Torqual and Cory speak together; bring me their conversation, but to my ears alone, so that no one will know that I listen."

Skel said: "It is boring and inconsequential chatter; they talk of this and that."

"Still, I wish to hear."



"Whatever you like."

Into Travec's ear came Torqual's voice: "... sent no funds for my account?"

"Fifteen gold coins only," spoke Cory.  
"Travec also brought funds from Casmir-ten gold crowns-but said they were for the company. Perhaps they were intended for you. Here! Take the lot!"

"It is a pittance!" said Torqual in disgust.

"This is Casmir's careful scheme: he thinks to divert me from my own plans

so that I should work in accordance with his."

"Does he know your plans?"

"Perhaps he guesses." Torqual turned and looked off down Glen Dagach. "I have made no great secret of them."

"Out of curiosity, then, what might be your plans?"

Torqual said tonelessly: "I will take command of these mountains, through devastation and terror. Then I will conquer both

Uplands, North and South. I will rally

the Ska once more to war. First we take Godelia, then Dahaut, and next all the Elder Isles. Then we attack the world. There never shall be such a conquest nor so wide an empire! That is my scheme. But now I must grovel to Casmir for men and weapons to take me through these arduous first times."

Cory spoke in a subdued voice. "Your plan has, if nothing else, the merit of grandeur."

Torqual said indifferently: "It is something which can be done. Hence, it must be done."

"The odds would seem to be against

you."

"Such odds are difficult to compute. They can fluctuate over night. Aillas is my foremost and worst enemy. He would seem formidable, with his army and his navy, but he is insensitive; he ignores Ulfish rancor against his Troice regime. The barons grudge him their every submission; many would revolt at a moment's notice."

"And you would lead them?"

"It is necessary. Left to themselves they are a proud and quarrelsome rabble; they grumble because Aillas has checked their feuds! Ha! When at last I lead them

they will know the meaning of Ska discipline! Compared to me, Aillas will seem an angel of mercy!"

Cory gave a noncommittal grunt. "My assignment is to assassinate Aillas. I command five murderers who will work for the joy of it-though all hope to be paid."

"That is a joke," said Torqual. "Casmir rewards his faithful servants with the twist of a noose. He bestows few boons after the deed is done."

Cory nodded. "If I am as successful as I hope, I can control Casmir nicely by holding Prince Dhrun as a captive. For

the moment, at least, our interests run parallel. I hope, therefore, that you will give me counsel and cooperation."

Torqual brooded for a moment, then asked: "How do you propose to act?"

"I am a careful man. I will spy out Aillas' movements. I will learn where he eats, sleeps and rides his horse; whether he uses a paramour or enjoys solitude, and the same for Dhrun. When I discover a pattern or an opportunity, I shall do my work."

"That is a methodical plan," said Torqual. "Still, it will require much time and effort, and might well provoke

suspicion. I can suggest a more immediate opportunity."

"I will be glad to hear it."

"Tomorrow I set off on a rich expedition. The town Willow Wyngate is guarded by Green Willow Castle. Lord Minch, his sons and his knights, have journeyed to Doun Darric; there they will greet King Aillas who has only just returned from abroad. The way is not far: only twenty miles and they think the castle secure in their absence. They are wrong; we will take Green Willow Castle and loot the town as well. Now then! Aillas and Lord Minch will be notified that Green Willow is under

attack; they will instantly ride to its relief. This may be your opportunity, since the route provides scope for ambush. A single arrow and Aillas is dead."

"What of Prince Dhrun?"

"This is the charm of the situation. Dhrun fell from a horse and broke a rib; he will stay at Doun Darric. If you ride at speed from your ambush, you may be able to take Dhrun as well."

"It is a bold thought."

"I will assign you a scout. He will show you where to lay your ambush and then



lead you to Doun Darric. He knows also where Dhrun is lodged."

Cory pulled at his chin. "If all goes well, both of us profit-to our mutual benefit and perhaps to our continued association."

Torqual nodded. "So it may be. We depart tomorrow after noon, so that we may attack Green Willow at dawn." He looked at the sky. "Clouds are sweeping in from the sea and soon rain will be blowing across Neep Meadow. You may bring your men into the keep to sleep by the fireplace."

Cory returned to where his company

waited. He said weightily: "I now will explain our venture. We are to put an arrow into King Aillas."

Este said with a small smile: "This news is no surprise."

Galgus said gruffly: "What is the plan? We expect to take risks, but we are alive today because we season daring with caution."

"Well spoken," said Travec. "I am not eager to die along these dank moors."

"If anything, I am even less eager than you," said Cory. "The plan bodes well. We strike in stealth from ambush, then

flee like wild birds to escape our punishment."

"That is sensible procedure," said Izmael. "On the steppe it is our native custom."

"At this moment you may put up the horses and bring your gear into the castle, where we will sleep by the fireplace. There I will explain further details of the plan."

Travec took his hammer-headed horse to the stables, and lingered a moment after the others were gone. He whispered:

"Skel! You must carry a message!"

"Cannot it be delayed? Both Voner and I are fatigued with all this moil. We were planning to spend an hour or so tracing out illusions."

"You must wait until after your task is done. Go instantly to the town Doun Darric, which lies northwest of this place. Seek out King Aillas, and without delay give him the following mes sage...

## IV

During the late afternoon veils of rain drifted up Glen Dagach, and presently slanted into Old Neep Meadow. Cory and his company gathered in the great

hall of the ancient castle, where flames roared high in the fireplace to cast a ruddy light around the room. They were served a supper of bread, cheese, a pot of venison stew and a leather sack of tart red wine.

After the meal the group became restless. Galgus brought out his dice, but no one cared to gamble. Kegan, from sheer boredom, looked into a dusty chamber under the old staircase, where he noticed, beneath the detritus of uncounted years, a cupboard of desiccated wood. He scraped away the trash and opened the warped doors, but in the dim light saw only empty shelves. As he turned away, his eye fell upon a

shape at the back of the lowest shelf. He reached down and extricated an oblong box. The box was large and heavy, and joined of dense cedar heartwood.

Kegan carried the box out to the table in front of the fireplace and while his comrades looked on, he pried open the lid. Everyone peered down at the object inside: a carefully carved fabrication of soapstone slabs and other pieces, stained black, and decorated with a hundred elaborations carved from onyx, jet and agate. Cory came to look. "It is a little catafaique, in the ancient style-a miniature, or a model, or perhaps a toy." He reached to lift it from the box, but Kegan seized his arm. "Stop! It may be a

bewitchment, or a cursed object! Let no one touch the thing!"

Torqual came into the hail, followed by a slender dark-haired woman of extreme beauty.

Cory called Torqual's attention to the miniature catafalque. "What do you know of this? Kegan found it under the stair case."

Torqual frowned down into the box. "It means nothing to me."

Este said: "In some fashionable house of Rome this object might well be used as a high-style salt cellar."

"It may be a shrine to someone's favorite cat," suggested Galgus the Daut. "In Falu Ffail, King Audry clothes his spaniels in trousers of purple velvet."

"Put it aside," said Torqual brusquely. "Such things are best not disturbed." He turned to the woman. "Melanthe, this is Cory of Falonges and these are his associates. I have forgotten their names, but this is a Hun, that is a Roman, that a Celt, over there a Daut, and that creature-half hawk, half wolf-declares himself a Dacian. What is your opinion of the group? Do not be afraid to speak your mind; they are devoid of illusions."

"They do not concern me." Melanthe



went to sit alone at the end of the table where she stared into the fire.

Travec whispered: "Voner! What do you see?"

"There is green in the woman. A tendril touches her; it darts so swift and sudden that I cannot trace it."

"What does that mean? Is she a node of force?"

"She is a shell."

Travec watched her a moment. She raised her head, looked around the room with brows knit. Travec averted his

eyes. He whispered: "What then? Did she sense my presence?"

"She is uneasy, but she does not know why. Do not stare at her."

"Why not?" muttered Travec. "Everyone else is doing so. She is the world's most beautiful woman."

"I do not understand such things."

Presently Melancthe left the room. Torqual and Cory conferred apart for half an hour, then Torqual departed as well.

"What now?" demanded Galgus. "It is

too early to sleep and the wine is vile.  
Who will game at dice?"

Este had gone to look into the cedar box.  
He said, "Rather, who will raise the  
cover on this toy catafalque to see what  
lies within?"

"Not I," said Galgus.

"Do not touch the thing," said Izmael the  
Hun. "You will bring a curse down upon  
the company."

"Not so," said Este. "It is clearly a  
macabre joke in the form of a jewel box  
and may well be brimming with  
sapphires and emeralds."

Kegan's interest was aroused. "That is reasonable. Maybe I will take one little peek, just to make sure."

Galgus looked toward Travec: "And what are you saying to yourself this time, Travec?"

"I chant my spell against death-magic," said Travec.

"Ah bah, it is nothing! Go to it, Kegan! A glimpse only; no harm can come of it!"

With one long yellow thumbnail Kegan lifted the soapstone lid. He bent his head, so that his thin crooked nose almost entered the crack, and peered

within. Then slowly he drew back and lowered the lid.

Cory demanded: "Well then, Kegan! Do not keep us in suspense! What did you see?"

"Nothing."

"So why all the drama?"

"It is a fine toy," said Kegan. "I will carry it upon my horse and take it away, as my little keepsake."

Cory gave him a wondering stare. "As you like."

At noon of the following day the two

companies departed Neep Meadow and rode down Glen Dagach. Where glen opened upon low moor, the parties separated. Cory, the five in his company, and the guide: a sallow sly-eyed stripling named Idis struck off to the northwest to arrange their ambush. Torqual, with his thirty-five warriors, continued westward toward Willow Wyn gate. For two hours they waited in the shelter of a forest, then at dusk continued along the road: down over the low moors and into the valley of the river Win.

The company rode at a carefully regulated pace, so that just as the first light of dawn brought substance to the

land, the troop entered the park surrounding Castle Green Willow and rode along the stately entry drive, between parallel lines of poplar trees.

The troop rounded a bend, to halt in consternation. A dozen knights, mounted on chargers, blocked the road, lances at the ready.

The knights charged. The bandits turned in confusion to flee, but a similar group of knights blocked the road to the rear. And now, from behind the poplars, stepped archers, to pour volley after volley into the screaming outlaws. Torqual on the instant turned his horse to the side, burst through a gap in the

poplars and crouching low, galloped like a madman across the country side. Sir Minch, who commanded the troop, sent off ten men in pursuit, with orders to track Torqual to the ends of the world if necessary. Those few outlaws who still survived he condemned to death on the spot, to save the toil of as many hangings. Swords were raised; swords fell; heads rolled, and Torqual's troop and his dreams of empire were at the same time dissolved.

The ten warriors pursued Torqual up Glen Dagach, where he rolled rocks down upon them, killing two. When the others arrived upon Old Neep Meadow, they found only the serving women and a



few small children. Torqual and Melanthe had already fled by secret ways up toward the high moors and the chasms at the back of Mount Sobh. At this time there was no point in further pursuit, even though Mount Sobh was not yet the ends of the world.

## V

At Lyonesse Town all was in flux, what with King Milo, Queen Caudabil, and Prince Brezante due to arrive for a three-day visit, and a festival suddenly ordained in their honour. The festival had been conceived by King Casmir, after his hopes for an advantageous

betrothal had gone glimmering. His enthusiasm for the visit had cooled, and he was especially reluctant to entertain his guests at a succession of long, bibulous banquets where King Milo, a noteworthy trencherman, and Queen Caudabil, only slightly less redoubtable, regaled themselves upon course after course of fine viands and great quantities of Castle Haidion's best wines. King Casmir therefore proclaimed a festival at which there would be all manner of sports, games and competitions in honour of the royal visitors: the high kick, the broad vault, footraces, wrestling, throwing the stone, sparring with padded staves on a plank over a mud pit, which would also be used at

tug-of-war trials. There would be dancing of jigs, hits and rounds to music; bull-baiting, an archery contest and jousting with buffed lances. The program was arranged so that King Milo and Queen Caudabil were constantly occupied, listening to panegyrics, judging contests, awarding prizes and applauding winners, consoling losers and granting awards. To all of these events, King Milo and Queen Caudabil, as royal sponsors, must give their keen attention, leaving no time for long and lavish feasts, at which King Milo might test his prodigious capacity for wine. The two instead must hurriedly nourish themselves at collations of cold ham,

bread and cheese, with flagons of stout ale to wash down the hearty and inexpensive fare.

King Casmir was pleased with his stratagem. He would be spared endless hours of utter boredom; further, the festival would demonstrate his benevolence and royal jocundity. There was no way he could avoid the welcoming banquet, nor the farewell feast-though the first might be truncated on the pretext of allowing the royal family time to recover from the rigors of the journey. Perhaps the second as well, reflected Casmir, on similar grounds.

Preparations for the festival were at

once put into effect, in order that gray old Lyonesse Town might be transformed into a setting for antic frivolity. Bunting was draped and banners raised around the periphery of the King's Parade, and a platform erected for the convenience of the royal families. At the side of the quadrangle, beside the Sfer Arct, a rack would support two great tuns of ale which each morning would be broached for those who wished to salute either King Milo, or King Casmir, or both.

Along the Sfer Arct booths came into existence, for the sale of sausages, fried fish, pork buns, tarts and pastries. Each booth was required to drape its visible

sections with gay cloths and ribbons, and shops along the avenue were enjoined to do like wise.

At the appointed hour King Milo, Queen Caudabil and Prince Brezante arrived at Castle Haidion. In the van rode six knights in gleaming dress armour, with black and ocher pennons flying from their lances. Another six knights, similarly accoutered, brought up the rear. In a lumbering unsprung vehicle, more wagon than carriage, King Milo and Queen Caudabil sat on a wide upholstered couch, under a green canopy hung with a hundred decorative tassels. Both Milo and Caudabil were portly, white-haired, round and florid of face,

and seemed more like canny old peasants on the way to market than the rulers of an ancient realm.

To the side rode Prince Brezante on an enormous bay gelding with a peculiarly large high rump. Perched on this great animal, Brezante, who was plump and pear-shaped, made no gallant first impression. His nose hung from a narrow back sloping forehead, to droop over his full mouth; his eyes were large, round and unblinking; his black hair was sparse, both on his scalp and at his chin where he entertained a small indecisive beard. Despite all, Brezante fancied himself a cavalier of romantic appeal and took great pains with his garments.

He wore a doublet of russet fustian, with sleeves of puff-pleated black and red stuff. A jaunty red forester's cap sat aslant his head, with a raven's wing for a panache.

The column came down the Sfer Arct. A dozen heralds in scarlet tabards and tight yellow hose stood six to each side of the way. As the carriage passed, they tilted their clarions to the sky and sounded a welcoming fanfare. The carriage turned from the Sfer Arct, into the King's Parade and halted before Castle Haidion. King Casmir, Queen Sollace and Princess Madouc stood waiting on the terrace. King Casmir raised his arm in amiable greeting; King Milo



responded in kind, as did Prince Brezante, after a glance toward Madouc, and so the royal visit began.

At the evening banquet, Madouc's protests went unheeded and she was required to sit with Prince Brezante at her left and Damar, Duke of Lalanq, to her right. During the meal, Madouc sat staring straight ahead at the fruit centerpiece, seemingly unaware of Brezante, who never gave off peering at her with his round black eyes. Madouc spoke little, responding to Brezante's facetious sallies with absentminded monosyllables, to such effect that Brezante at last lapsed into scowls and sulks, to which Madouc was serenely

indifferent. From the corner of her eye she noticed that both King Casmir and Queen Sollace pointedly ignored her conduct; apparently they had accepted her point of view, and now, so she hoped, she would be left in peace.

Madouc's triumph was of short duration. On the next morning, the two royal families went down to the pavilion on the King's Parade, that they might witness the beginning of the competitions. Once again Madouc's explanations that she preferred not to join the party went for naught. Lady Vosse, speaking on explicit behalf of Queen Sollace, declared that Madouc must participate in the ceremonies, and

without fail. Scowling and fretting, Madouc marched to the pavilion and plumped herself down beside Queen Caudabil, in the chair intended for King Milo, so that Milo sat at Caudabil's other side and Brezante was forced to take himself to the far end of the platform, beside King Casmir. Again Madouc was pleased, if somewhat mystified, by the lack of response from King Casmir and Queen Sollace to her self-willed conduct. What was in the wind, to cause them such portentous restraint?

The answer to her question was not long in coming. Almost as soon as the royal party had been seated, Spargoy the Chief

Herald, stepped to the front of the platform, to face the crowds which filled the quadrangle. A pair of young heralds sounded that fanfare known as 'Call to Attention!', and the folk in the King's Parade became silent.

Spargoy unrolled a scroll. "I do accurately read and recite the words of that proclamation issued on this day by His Royal Majesty, King Casmir. Let all give full heed to the import of these words. I now begin." Spargoy opened the scroll and read:

I, King Casmir, Monarch of Lyonesse, its several territories and provinces, declare in this fashion:

At Lyonesse Town rises an edifice of exalted condition: the new Cathedral of Sollace Sanctissima, destined to become far-famed for the richness of its appurtenances. That it may best fulfill its function, the premises must be endowed with those articles deemed holy and worshipful in themselves-namely, those rare and precious relics, or other objects associated with past exemplars of the Christian faith.

We are told that these relics are worthy of our acquisition; hence, we are now prepared to offer our royal gratitude to such persons who endow us with good and holy relics, that we may make our new cathedral pre-eminent among all

others. Our gratitude is contingent upon truth and authenticity. A factitious object will excite not only our royal displeasure, but will incur the frightful processes of divine wrath! So let all who are tempted to knavery: beware!

Especially joyful to our hearts will be the Cross of Saint Elric, the Talisman of Saint Uldine, the Sacred Nail, and-most cherished of all-that chalice known as the Holy Grail. The rewards shall match the worth of the relic; whosoever brings us the Holy Grail may ask of us any boon his heart desires, up to and including the most precious treasure of the kingdom: the hand of the Princess Madouc in marriage. In the absence of the Grail,

whoever brings us the relic otherwise most holy and sublime, he may demand of us as he likes, including the hand of our beautiful and gracious Princess Madouc in marriage, after an appropriate and seemly betrothal.

I address this proclamation to all who have ears to hear and strength to pursue the quest! From every land, from high to low; none shall be dismissed by reason of place, age or rank. Let all persons of bravery and enterprise go forth to seek the Grail, or such other holy objects accessible to acquisition, for the glory of the Cathedral of Sollace Sanctissima!

'So say I, King Casmir of Lyonesse; let

my words resound in all ears!"

The clarions sounded; Sir Spargoy rolled up the scroll and retired.

Madouc heard the proclamation with astonishment. What new nonsense was this? Must her name and physical attributes, or their lack, now be bandied about the land, and discussed by every starveling knight, addlepate, mooncalf, varlet and cock-a-hoop bravo of the realm and elsewhere? The scope of the edict left her speechless. She sat stiff and still, conscious nonetheless of the many eyes that scrutinized her. A scandal and an outrage! thought Madouc. Why had she not been consulted?



Sir Spargoy meanwhile had gone on to introduce King Milo and Queen Caudabil, whom he described as patron and patroness of the festival, the judges of all competitions and the sponsors of all prizes. At this information, both King Milo and Queen Caudabil stirred uneasily in their seats.

The competitions began. King Casmir watched a few moments, then unobtrusively departed the pavilion by the stairs which led up to the terrace, followed a moment later by Prince Brezante. Madouc, observing that no attention was being paid to her, did the same. Arriving upon the terrace, she found Brezante leaning on the

balustrade, looking down at the activity in the Parade.

Brezante by this time had learned of Madouc's refusal to consider his suit. He spoke to her in a voice subtly mocking: "Well then, Princess! It seems that you will be married after all! I here and now congratulate this still unknown champion, whoever he may be! You will live henceforth in delicious suspense. Eh, then? Am I correct?"

Madouc replied in a soft voice: "Sir, your ideas are incorrect in every possible respect."

Brezante drew back with eyebrows

raised high. "Still, are you not excited that so many persons, both noble knights and callow squires, will go forth on quests that they may claim you in wedlock?"

"If anything, I am saddened that so many folk will strive in vain."

Prince Brezante asked in perplexity: "What does that remark mean?"

"It means what I say it means."

"Ha," muttered Brezante. "Somewhere I detect an ambiguity."

Madouc shrugged and turned away.

Making sure that Brezante did not follow, she circled the front of the castle to the beginning of the cloistered walk and there turned aside into the orangery. In a far corner she secluded herself and sprawled out in the sunlight, chewing on grass.

At last she sat up. It was hard to think so many thoughts and reach so many decisions at the same time.

First things first. She hoisted herself to her feet and brushed the grass from her gown. Returning into the castle, she took herself to the queen's parlour. Sollace had also excused herself from the platform, pleading urgent consultations.

She had gone to her parlour, where she had fallen into a doze. Upon Madouc's entrance, she looked about, blinking out from among the cushions. "What is it now?"

"Your Majesty, I am disturbed by the king's proclamation."

Queen Sollace was still somewhat torpid and her thoughts came sluggishly. "I fail to grasp your concern. Every cathedral of note is famous for the excellence of its relics."

"So it may be. Still, I hope that you will intercede with the king, so that my hand in marriage is not one of the boons

which might be conferred. I would not like to be traded away for somebody's old shoe, or a tooth, or some such oddment."

Sollace said stiffly: "I am powerless to effect such changes. The king has carefully considered his policy."

Madouc scowled. "At the very least, I should have been consulted. I am not interested in marriage. It seems in certain ways both vulgar and untidy."

Queen Sollace posited herself higher among the cushions. "As you must know, I am married to His Majesty the King. Do you consider me 'vulgar and

untidy'?"

Madouc pursed her lips. "I can only speculate that, as a queen, you are exempt from such judgments. That would be my best guess."

Queen Sollace, half-amused, sank back into the cushions. "In due course you will understand these matters with greater lucidity."

"All this to the side," cried Madouc, "it is unthinkable that I should marry some witling, merely because he brings you a nail! For all we know he has just found it behind the stable."

"Most unlikely! The criminal would not dare a divine fulmination. I am told by Father Umphred that a special level in Hell is set apart for those who falsify relics. In any case, it is a chance we must take."

"Bah!" muttered Madouc. "The plan is absurd."

The queen again raised herself up. "I failed to hear your remark."

"It was of no consequence."

The queen gave a stately nod. "In any case, you must obey the king's ordinance, and to the exact degree."



"Yes, Your Highness!" said Madouc with sudden energy. "I shall do precisely that! Please excuse me; at this very instant I must make my preparations."

Madouc curtseyed, turned and left the chamber. Sollace looked after her in wonder. "What does she mean by 'preparations'? Marriage is not so imminent as all that. How, in any event, would she think to prepare herself?"

## VI

Madouc ran at a brisk half-trot along the main gallery: past statues of ancient heroes, urns taller than herself, alcoves

furnished with ornate tables and tall-backed chairs. At intervals, men-at-arms in the scarlet and gold livery of Haidion stood with halberds at parade rest. Only their eyes moved to follow Madouc as she passed them by.

At a pair of tall narrow doors Madouc stopped short. She hesitated; then, pushing open one of the doors, peered through the gap into a long dim chamber illuminated by a single narrow window in the far wall. This was the castle library. A shaft of light slanted down across a table; here sat Kerce the librarian, a man of advanced years though still tall and erect, with a gentle mouth and a dreamer's forehead in a face

otherwise austere. Madouc knew little of Kerce save that he was said to be the son of an Irish druithine, and a poet in his own right.

After a single sideglance toward the door, Kerce continued with his work. Madouc came slowly into the room. The air carried an aromatic reek, of old wood, wax, lavender oil, the soft sweet fust of well-tanned leather. Tables to left and right supported librams two or three feet on a side and three inches thick, bound in limp leather or sometimes heavy black felt. Shelves were crammed with scrolls, parchments in cedar boxes, papers tied in bundles, books clamped between carefully tooled boards of

beechwood.

Madouc approached Kerce, step by demure step. At last he straightened in his chair, turned his head to watch her approach, and not without a trace of dubious speculation, for Madouc's repute had penetrated even the far fastnesses of the library.

Madouc stopped beside the table, and looked down at the manuscript upon which Kerce had been working. She asked:

"What are you doing?"

Kerce looked critically down at the

parchment. "Two hundred years ago some nameless lout covered over this page with a paste of powdered chalk mixed with sour milk and seaweed gum. Then he attempted to indite the Morning Ode of Merosthenes, addressed to the nymph Laloe, upon his discovery of her one summer dawn plucking pomegranates in his orchard. The lout copied without care and his characters, as you see, are like bird-droppings. I expunge his scrawl and dissolve his vile compost, but delicately, since below there may be as many as five other layers of ever older and ever more enthralling mysteries. Or, to my sorrow, I might find more ineptitude. Still, I must examine each in turn. Who knows? I

might uncover one of Jirolamo's lost cantos. So there you have it: I am an explorer of ancient mysteries; such is my profession and my great adventure."

Madouc examined the manuscript with new interest. "I had no idea you lived so exciting a life!"

Kerce spoke gravely: "I am intrepid and I defy every challenge! I scratch at this surface with the delicacy of a surgeon cutting the carbuncle of an angry king! But my hand is deft and my tools are true! See them, loyal comrades all: my stout badgertail brush, my faithful oil of limpet, my obsidian edge and dangerous bone needles, my trusty range-wood rub-

sticks! They are all paladins who have served me well! Together we have made far voyages and visited unknown lands!"

"And always you return safe and sound!"

Kerce turned her a quizzical glance, one eyebrow arched high, the other in a crooked twist. "I wonder what you mean by that."

Madouc laughed. "You are the second today to ask me such a question."

"And what was your response?"

"I told him that my words meant what I said they meant."

"You have odd quirks in your mind for one so young." Kerce turned in his seat and gave her his full attention. "And what brings you here? Is it caprice, or the work of Destiny?"

Madouc said soberly: "I have a question which I hope you will answer."

"Ask away; I will lay out all my lore for your inspection."

"There has been much talk of relics here at Haidion. I have become curious about what they call the Holy Grail. Is there indeed such a thing? If so, what does it look like, and where might it be found?"



"Of the Holy Grail I can tell you only a few bare facts," said d Kerce. "While I know of a hundred religions, I give credencee to none. The Grail is reputedly the chalice used by Jesus Christos when last he dined with his disciples. The chalice came into the hands of Joseph of Arimathea, who, so it is said, caught blood in the chalice from the wounds of the crucified Christ.

Subsequently, Joseph wandered across the world and at last visited Ireland, where he left the Grail on Isle Inchagoill in Lough Corrib north of Gaiway. A band of heathen Celts threatened the island chapel, and a monk named Father Sisembert brought the to chalice to the

Elder Isles, and from this point onward the stories go at variance. According to one account the chalice is buried in crypts on Weamish Isle. Another reports that as Father Sisembert passed through the Forest of Tantrevalles, he met a dreadful ogre, who put him to evil uses, claiming that Father ad Sisembert had neglected courtesy. One of the ogre's three heads drank Sisimbert's blood; another ate his liver. The third head suffered from toothache and, lacking appetite, made dice of Sisimbert's knuckles. But perhaps that is only a story to be told around the fire on stormy nights."

"And who would know the truth?"

Kerce made a pensive gesture. "Who can say? Perhaps in the end it is all no more than legend. Many knights of chivalry have sought the Grail across the length and breadth of Christendom, and many have wandered the Elder Isles on the quest. Some departed forlorn; others died in combat or suffered bewitchment; others disappeared and have been seen no more. In truth, it seems mortal peril to seek the Grail!"

"Why should that be? unless somewhere it is guarded with great jealousy?"

"As to that, I cannot say. And never forget that in the end, the quest may only be the pursuit of an ideal dream!"

"Do you believe so?"

"I have no beliefs in this regard, nor in many another. Why are you concerned?"

"Queen Sollace wants to grace her new cathedral with the Holy Grail. She has gone so far as to offer me in marriage to whomever brings her this object! My own wishes, needless to say, were not consulted."

Kerce gave a dry chuckle. "I begin to understand your interest!"

"If I myself found the Grail, then I would be safe from such an annoyance."

"So it would seem-still, the Grail may no longer exist."

"If such is the case, a false Grail might be offered the queen. She would not know the difference."

"But I would," said Kerce. "The ploy would not succeed; I can assure you of this!"

Madouc looked at him sidewise. "How can you be so sure?"

Kerce compressed his lips, as if he had said more than he might have wished. "It is a secret. I will share it with you, if you hold it tightly to yourself."

"I promise."

Kerce rose to his feet and went to a cupboard. He removed a portfolio, extracted a drawing which he brought to the table. Madouc saw depicted a footed pale blue chalice eight inches tall, with handles at either side, slightly irregular. A dark blue band encircled the top rim; the base showed a ring of the same dark blue color.

"This is a drawing of the Grail. It was sent from Ireland to the monastery on Weamish Isle long ago, and rescued from the Goths by one of the monks. It is a true depiction, exact even to this nick in the base, and the differing length of

the handles."

Kerce returned drawing and portfolio to the cupboard. "Now you know what there is to be known of the Grail. I prefer to keep the drawing secret, for several reasons."

"I will keep silent," said Madouc.

"Unless the queen tries to marry me to someone who brings her a false Grail; then, if all else fails-"

Kerce waved his hand. "Say no more. I will make a true and accurate copy of the drawing, which may be used for attestation, if any such is needed."

Madouc departed the library; then, taking pains to go unobserved, she went around to the stables. Sir Pom-Pom was nowhere in evidence. Madouc looked in on Tyfer and rubbed his nose, then returned to the castle.

At noon Madouc dined in the Small Refectory with her six maids-in-waiting. Today they were unusually voluble, for there was much to discuss. King Casmir's proclamation, however, came to dominate the conversation. Elissia remarked, perhaps with sincerity, that Madouc must now be considered a famous person, whose name would resound down centuries to come. "Think of it!" sighed Elissia. "Here is the sheer



stuff of romance! Legends will tell how handsome knights from far and near dared fire, ice, dragon and troll; how they fought crazed Celt and fierce Goth, all for love of the beautiful red-haired princess!"

Madouc offered a small correction. "My hair is not precisely red. It is a most unusual colour, as of copper alloyed with gold."

Chlodys said: "Nevertheless, for purposes of the legend, you will be considered red-haired and beautiful, with no regard whatever for the truth."

Devonet made a thoughtful comment.

"As of now, we cannot be absolutely sure that this legend will come to pass."

"How so?" asked Ydraint.

"Much depends upon circumstances. Assume that some valiant and handsome knight brings the Holy Grail to Queen Sollace. King Casmir asks as to what boon the brave knight desires. At this point events hang in the balance. If he decides that he is disinclined for marriage, he might ask the king for a fine horse or a pair of good hunting dogs-which of course provides small scope for a legend."

Chlodys said sagaciously: "It is a risky

situation."

Felice spoke: "Another matter! It is the best relic which wins the boon! So that after great efforts and far quests, the best relic brought to the queen might be, let us say, a hair from the tail of the lion who ate Saint Milicia in the Roman arena. Poor stuff, of course, but Madouc must still marry the lummoX who submits such an article."

Madouc tossed her head. "I am not so pliable as you might like to think."

Devonet spoke with grave concern. "I will counsel you! Be meek, modest and patient! Yield gracefully to the king's

commands! It is not only your duty; it is also the way of prudence. That is my reasoned advice."

Madouc listened with no great attention. "Naturally, you must do as you think proper."

"One word more! The king has declared that if you cark or pout, or attempt to avoid his fiat, he will simply give you off into servitude!"

Chlodys turned to Madouc, who sat stolidly eating raisin pudding. "And what do you say to that?"

"Nothing."

"But what will you do?"

"You shall see."

## VII

On the second day of the festival King Milo and Queen Caudabil were aroused early from their beds and allowed only a quick breakfast of curds and groats so that they might be on hand to call out the start to the tug-of-war between the members of the Fishmonger's Guild and the Stonemason's Guild.

Madouc was also up early, before Lady Vosse could communicate the wishes of Queen Sollace. Madouc went directly

out to the stables. This fine bright morning she found Sir Pom-Pom forking manure from the stalls into a barrow. "Sir Pom-Pom!" called Madouc. "Step outside, if you please, where the air is less thick."

"You must wait your turn," said Sir Pom-Pom. "The barrow is full and I must wheel it out to the dungheap. Then I will be able to give you a moment or two."

Madouc compressed her lips but waited in silence until Sir Pom-Pom, with measured deliberation, put aside the barrow and came out into the stable-yard. "Whatever your whims, you may

no longer count upon me for their fulfillment," said Pom-Pom.

Madouc spoke severely: "Your conduct seems surly and gruff! I would not like to think you a boor. Why do you speak so brusquely?"

Sir Pom-Pom gave a bark of curt laughter. "Hah! It is simple enough. Have you not heard the king's proclamation?"

"I have indeed."

"I have heard it as well. Tomorrow I relinquish my post as royal stable-attendant and lackey to the princess. On

the following day I will seize time by the forelock and go in search of the Holy Grail, or any other relic I can lay my hands upon. It may well be the opportunity of my lifetime."

Madouc gave a slow nod. "I understand your ambition. But is it not sad that you must give up your good and secure employment to go out chasing a will-o'-the-wisp? To me it seems an act of reckless folly."

"So it may be," said Sir Pom-Pom doggedly. "Still, such chances for fame and fortune come rarely. One must grasp them as they pass."



"Quite so. Still, I might help you have the best of both worlds were you to moderate your churlish behavior."

Sir Pom-Pom looked around in cautious interest. "How so and to what degree?"

"You must swear to hold secret what I am about to tell you."

"Hm. Will this secret involve me in trouble?"

"I think not."

"Very well. I will hold my tongue. I have done so before and I suppose I can do so again."

"Listen then! The king has ordered me to go forth in search of my pedigree, and without delay. Admittedly he was in a state of exasperation when he spoke, but his orders were explicit, and included the service of a suitable escort.

Therefore, I command that you serve me in this capacity. If you obey, you will retain your employment and still be able to seek the Holy Grail."

Sir Pom-Pom squinted off into the sunlight. "The proposition, on the surface, seems reasonable. Still, what if our quests lead in different directions?"

Madouc brushed aside the objection. "Why borrow trouble? Obviously we

cannot anticipate every quirk of Fate before we have even made our preparations."

Sir Pom-Pom put on a stubborn frown. "I still feel that we should agree on a plan."

"Tush," said Madouc. "More than likely, the question will never arise. If so, we shall deal with it then and there."

"All this to the side," growled Sir Pom-Pom, "I would feel easier if I had definite orders from the mouth of the king himself."

Madouc gave her head a decisive shake. "I have been granted leave to go, with no

restrictions; that is enough. I do not want to re-open the discussion and risk some foolish qualification."

Sir Pom-Pom turned a dubious glance over his shoulder. "It is true that I have long-standing orders to attend you wherever you ride, and they have never been revoked. If I choose to retain my employment, the king has charged me to follow where you go, and serve you as best I may. When do you wish to depart?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Impossible! It is already late in the day; I will not be able to make the

preparations!"

"Very well. We will leave on the morning of the day after tomorrow, half an hour before dawn. Have Tyfer saddled and ready, and also a horse for yourself."

"Now then," said Sir Pom-Pom, "we must think clearly in this regard. Even though you claim that His Majesty has given you leave to go off on this venture, is it possible that he might have spoken in haste, or that he might change his mind?"

"Anything is possible," said Madouc haughtily. "I cannot trouble myself with

every swing of the weathercock."

"What if he suddenly discovers that his beloved Madouc is missing and sends off his knights and his heralds to bring her back? They would have an easy time of it if you were mounted on the dappled pony Tyfer, with the costly saddle and fringed reins. No, Princess! We must ride as might the children of peasants; our horses must attract no attention; otherwise we may well be home and in disgrace long before we arrive even so far as Frogmarsh."

Madouc tried to argue that Tyfer, with his dappled coat, was of a sort to blend among the shadows of a landscape and

was hence inconspicuous, but Sir Pom-Pom would hear nothing of it. "I will select the proper mounts; you need think no more on the subject."

"If that is how it must be, so shall it be," said Madouc. "Still, you must pack the saddlebags well, with bread, cheese, dried fish, raisins, olives and wine. You will obtain these victuals from the royal pantry, which you will enter by crawling through the back window, as you well know through long experience. Bring weapons, or at least a knife to cut cheese and an axe to hew wood. Do you have any questions?"

"What of money? We cannot go skiting

the countryside over without good silver coins."

"I will carry three gold pieces in my wallet. This should amply suffice for our needs."

"So it should, were we able to spend them."

"The gold is good round gold, soft and yellow, even though it derived from Shimrod."

"Of that I have no doubt, but how will you spend such gold? To buy a wisp of hay for the horses? Or a plate of beans for our own nourishment? Who would



give us back our proper exchange? They might well take us for thieves and clap us into the nearest dungeon."

Madouc looked off across the stable-yard. "I had not considered along these lines. What must be done?"

Sir Pom-Pom made a wise signal. "Luckily, I know how to deal with the problem. Fetch here your three gold pieces, as soon as possible."

"Oh?" Madouc raised her eyebrows in puzzlement. "What then?"

"It so happens that I need a pair of boots, stout and proper, flared at the knee after

the new mode, each with a suitable buckle. I will purchase the boots, which are needful for the journey, and I will pay with a gold piece. The cobbler must provide the exchange in silver and copper, which then we may use for our expenses."

Madouc glanced at the buskins currently worn by Sir Pom Pom. "You seem adequately shod."

"Still, we ride abroad, and must maintain our dignity!"

"What is the cost of these elegant new boots?"

"A silver form!" blurted Sir Pom-Pom in scorn. "Is it really so much when one demands both style and quality?"

Madouc heaved a sigh. "I suppose not. What of the other two gold pieces?"

"Have no fear! I will contrive a plan which will serve our purposes! But you must bring me the gold at once, that I may start negotiations!"

"As you wish, but work to good effect! We must leave Haidion before something happens to change our plans!"

Sir Pom-Pom, still dubious in regard to the venture, looked around the stable-

yard. "Where will be our first destination?"

"We go first to Thripsey Shee, where I will take counsel with my mother."

Sir Pom-Pom gave a grudging nod. "She might even have news of the Holy Grail."

"That is possible."

"So be it!" declared Sir Pom-Pom with sudden energy. "I am not one to ignore the call of Destiny!"

"Brave words, Sir Pom-Pom! I am of like mind."

Sir Pom-Pom turned Madouc a sly and waggish grin. "If I win the boon, I will then be entitled to wed the royal princess!"

Madouc pursed her lips against a smile. "I do not know about that. But surely you would be received at court, where you could choose a spouse from among my maids-in-waiting."

"First I must possess myself of the Grail," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Then I will make my own choice. But as of this moment, fetch the gold, and I will see to my business."

Madouc ran at speed to her chambers.

She brought out the three gold coins from a secret place under her bed and took them to the stables. Sir Pom-Pom hefted their weight, examined them on both sides, bit upon them and at last was satisfied.

"Now I must run down into town for my boots. When you make ready, dress as a peasant. You can not safely go abroad as the proud Princess Madouc."

"Very well! I will meet you at the appointed time. Take care not to get caught in the pantry!"

As Madouc returned to her chambers she was accosted by Lady Vosse, who spoke

in sharp tones: "Where have you been? Are you devoid of all sense of duty?"

Madouc looked up in wonder, mouth innocently adroop. "What have I done this time?"

"Surely you remember! I instructed you myself! You must remain in attendance upon our guests! That is proper etiquette. It is also the wish of the queen."

"It is the queen who invited these folk here, not I," grumbled Madouc. "Go rouse the queen from her own bed."

Lady Vosse stood back, momentarily at a loss for words. Then, rallying, she

subjected Madouc to an examination, nose drawn up in distaste. "Your gown is soiled and you reek of horse! I might have known that you were at the stables! Quick then! To your chamber and into something fresh-perhaps your new blue frock. Come now, on the run! There is no time to waste!"

Ten minutes later Madouc and Lady Vosse arrived on the platform, where King Milo and Queen Caudabil were observing the stone-throw competition, though with little attention.

As noon approached, stewards began to set out a collation of cold beef and cheese on a trestle at the back of the



platform, so that King Milo and Queen Caudabil could enjoy the sports with no interruption for a full-scale repast.

Taking note of these preparations, Milo and Caudabil conferred in low voices, then Milo suddenly clutched his side and set up a hollow groaning.

Queen Caudabil called out to Sir Mungo the Seneschal: "Alas! King Milo has suffered a seizure! It is his old complaint! We will be unable to enjoy any more games and competitions! He must retire at once to our quarters for rest and proper treatment!"

Once in their chambers, Queen Caudabil ordered in a repast of eight courses and

a sufficiency of good wine, which she declared was the best possible tonic for King Milo.

During the middle afternoon Prince Brezante took a message to King Casmir, to the effect that King Milo felt well enough to join King Casmir at the evening banquet, and so it was, with King Casmir and Queen Sollace sitting at table with the now merry Milo and Caudabil until well into the evening.

In the morning King Milo was unable to rise early for fear of a new attack, so that King Casmir and Queen Sollace sat as judges at the footraces. Meanwhile King Milo and Queen Caudabil took

hearty breakfasts and were so improved that they declared themselves ready to sit at a noon banquet of ordinary or even festive proportions, while Sir Mungo and other officials of the court supervised the competitions.

Late in the afternoon all the games and competitions were concluded and it only remained for the champions to be awarded their prizes. The two royal families assembled at one side of the platform; at the other gathered those who had gained victory in the various sports, each now wearing a laurel wreath and showing self-conscious grins to the crowds in the quadrangle.

At last all was in readiness. Madouc found herself seated beside Brezante, whose efforts at conversation were desultory.

Four under-heralds blew a fanfare, and Sir Mungo stepped to the front of the platform. "This is an auspicious day! Our royal guests from Blaloc regrettably must make their departure tomorrow, but we hope that they have enjoyed to the fullest the superb demonstrations of speed, stamina and skill which our men of Lyonesse have demonstrated over the last three days! I will announce the champions and in each case King Milo will bestow the prize, so well-deserved, so proudly achieved, and so long to be

cherished! And now without further ado-  
" Sir Mungo raised his hand high in a dramatic gesture. He looked all around, up the Sfer Arct, and his voice went dead in his throat. Slowly his hand sank so that, with a trembling finger, it pointed.

Down the Sfer Arct came a strange conveyance: a large black catafaique borne on the shoulders of four running corpses, which at one time had used the names Izmael the Hun, Este the Sweet, Galgus of Dahaut and Kegan the Celt. On top of the catafaique stood a fifth corpse: the sallow young scout Idis, who now wielded a whip and slashed at the four running cadavers, urging them to their

best efforts.

Nearer came the corpses carrying their elaborate burden. With wild sweeps of the whip Idis guided them into the King's Parade, while the afrighted crowds drew back.

In front of the platform the runners tottered and collapsed. The catafalque fell to the stone flags and broke open; out rolled another corpse: Cory of Falonges.

## VIII

The royal family of Blaloc took a last breakfast at Haidion in company with

King Casmir and Queen Sollace. It was a sombre occasion. The two queens made polite conversation, but the two kings had little to say, and Prince Brezante sat moodily silent.

Princess Madouc had not appeared for breakfast but no one troubled to inquire in regard to her absence. After breakfast, with the sun now halfway up the sky, King Milo, Queen Caudabil and Prince Brezante exchanged final compliments with King Casmir and Queen Sollace and took their leave. King Casmir and Queen Sollace stepped out upon the terrace to watch the column depart.

Lady Vosse came from the castle and

approached King Casmir. "Your Highness, I noticed the absence of Princess Madouc at the leave-taking and went to inquire the reason for her lassitude. In her chamber I found there this missive, which, as you see, is addressed to you."

King Casmir, frowning in automatic displeasure, broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. He read:

*'Your Royal Highness, my best respects!*

*In accordance with your commands I have set out to discover the name and condition*



*of my father, and also the details of my pedigree. Your instructions were definite; I have commanded for myself the services of an escort. As soon as my goals have been achieved, I will return. I informed Queen Sollace of my intention to obey Your Majesty's orders in this matter. I depart immediately.*

*'Madouc'*

King Casmir looked blankly at Queen Sollace. "Madouc has gone."

'Gone'? Where?"

"Somewhere-to seek her pedigree, so she says." Casmir slowly read the note aloud.

"So that is what the little vixen meant!" cried Sollace. "And now-what is to be done?"

"I must consider. Perhaps nothing."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## I

An hour before dawn, with the castle silent, Madouc climbed from her bed. For a moment she stood indecisive, hugging herself and shivering to the cool air which played around her thin shanks. She went to the window; it seemed as if the day might be fair; still, at this dim hour the world seemed cheerless and unsympathetic. Doubts slid into Madouc's mind; could it be she was making a foolish, dreadful mistake?

Madouc shivered and hopped away from

the window. Standing by her bed, she considered. Nothing had changed. She scowled and set her mouth into a firm line. Decisions had been made; they were irrevocable.

Madouc quickly dressed in a peasant boy's knee-length smock, bast stockings, ankle-boots, and a loose cloth cap pulled low to hide her curls. Taking up a small bundle of extra belongings, she left her chambers, stole along the dim corridor, descended the stairs and went from the castle by a back way, out into the pre-dawn stillness. She stopped to look and listen, but no one was abroad. So far, so good. She set off around the castle toward the stables. At the edge of

the service-yard she paused in the shadows; only the most discerning eye could have identified this thin and furtive peasant boy as Princess Madouc.

In the kitchen scullions and fire-boys were astir; maids would soon be going out to the buttery. At the moment the service-yard was empty; Madouc darted across the open space and so made her way unchallenged to the stables. Here Sir Pom-Pom awaited her with a pair of horses saddled and ready. Madouc examined the horses without enthusiasm. To one side a sway-backed bay mare of advanced age, with one walleye and a tail woefully lacking in hair; to the other, a gray gelding almost as old, fat in the

barrel and thin in the shank. Sir Pom-Pom had achieved well his stated purpose of avoiding prideful ostentation.

Madouc's saddle had been fitted on the bay mare; the gray gelding was evidently Sir Pom-Pom's chosen steed. Sir Pom-Pom himself wore not his usual garments, but a smart doublet of good blue cloth, a blue cap with a jaunty red feather, and a pair of glossy new boots, flaring modishly high past the knees and boasting pewter buckles at the insteps.

"Your garments are stylish," said Madouc. "You would seem almost dapper were it not that you still show the face of Sir Pom-Pom."

Sir Pom-Pom scowled. "My face cannot be changed."

"Were not those garments costly?"

Sir Pom-Pom gave a brisk jerk of the hand. "It is all relative. Have you not heard the saying: 'When Need is on the march, Expense must step aside'?"

Madouc put on a sour face. "Whoever made up this nonsense was either a spendthrift or a fool."

"Not so! The saying is apt! To change over the gold pieces, I bought needful articles! One does not go forth on an important quest looking the

hobbledehoy."

"I see. Where is the balance of the money?"

"I carry it in my wallet, for safekeeping."

Madouc extended her hand. "Give it here, Sir Pom-Pom, on the instant!"

Sir Pom-Pom sullenly reached in his pouch, brought out coins, which he handed over to Madouc. She reckoned up the sum, then looked back to Sir Pom-Pom. "Surely there is more money than this!"

"Possibly so, but I hold it for security."



"That is unnecessary. You may give me the full total of the exchange."

Sir Pom-Pom tossed over his wallet.

"Take as you will."

Madouc opened it and counted the coins.

"This surely is not all?"

"Bah!" grumbled Sir Pom-Pom.

"Perhaps I still carry a few odd pieces in my pocket."

"Give them here-every last farthing!"

Sir Pom-Pom said with dignity: "I will retain one silver form and three copper pennies, for incidental expense." He

passed over further coins. Madouc poured all into her pouch, and returned the wallet to Sir Pom-Pom. "We shall have an accounting later," said Madouc. "You have not heard the last of this, Sir Pom-Pom."

"Bah," muttered Sir Pom-Pom. "It is no great matter. Let us be on our way. The bay mare shall be your steed. Her name is Juno."

Madouc gave a sniff of disdain. "Her belly sags low! Will she support my weight?"

Sir Pom-Pom smiled grimly. "Remember, you are no longer a prideful

princess! You are a vagabond."

"I am a prideful vagabond. Keep this in mind, if you will."

Sir Pom-Pom shrugged. "Juno has a kindly gait. She neither jibs nor shies, though she will take a fence no more. My own horse is Fustis. He was at one time a war-charger of note; he responds best to a firm seat and a strong hand." Sir Pom-Pom swaggered in his new boots over to Fustis; in a single brave bound he vaulted into the saddle. Madouc mounted Juno more deliberately, and the two set off up the Sfer Arct, into the hilly region north of Lyonesse Town.

Two hours along the way they arrived at the village Swally Water and here came upon a crossroad. Madouc read the sign. "To the east is the village Fring; we shall travel this lane to Fring and there veer north, and so come into Old Street."

"It is a longer route, by some miles," noted Sir Pom-Pom.

"Perhaps so, but by keeping to the back lanes we will tend to avoid anyone sent out to impede our journey."

Sir Pom-Pom grunted. "I thought that His Majesty had ratified your quest, and with all his heartfelt blessings."

"That is how I interpret his commands," said Madouc. "Still, I prefer to take nothing for granted."

Sir Pom-Pom gave the remark careful thought, then said, somewhat glumly: "I hope that I find the Holy Grail before we need to test your interpretation."

Madouc deigned no reply.

At noon the two passed through Fring and, finding no lane leading northeast, continued eastward across a pleasant country side of farms and meadows. Presently they arrived at the town Abatty Dell where a fair was in progress. At Sir Pom-Pom's urging, they dismounted,

tethered their horses to a rail at the front of the inn, and went to watch the clowns and jugglers performing in the square. Sir Pom-Pom gave a cry of amazement. "Look yonder! That man in the red hat just now thrust a blazing torch down his throat! Look! He does so again! It is a marvel! His gut must be iron, from top to bottom!"

"An unusual talent, indeed," said Madouc.

Sir Pom-Pom's attention was caught by another performance. "See there! It is finesse, full and true! Aha, did you see? That was a goodly thrust!"

Madouc, turning to look, saw a man and a woman lying on their backs about fifteen feet apart. With thrusts of their feet they propelled a small child back and forth through the air between them, lofting the child higher and even higher with each passage. The child, undersized, and wearing only a ragged breechclout, jerked and twisted desperately in mid-air so that he might alight buttocks-first on the coiled legs of the target-individual. This person, after catching the child with dexterous feet, thrust out legs to propel him back through space the way he had come.

Upon conclusion of the display the man cried out: "Mikelaus will now accept

your gratuities!" The child ran among the spectators holding out his cap for coins.

"Ha hah!" exclaimed Sir Pom-Pom.

"That trick deserves a farthing!" He reached in one of his side-pockets and brought forth a copper coin which he dropped into the soiled cap extended by Mikelaus. Madouc watched with raised eyebrows.

The three performers went on to another feat. The man placed a flat board two feet long on top of an eight-foot pole; the woman lifted Mikelaus so that he crouched on the board. The man thrust the pole high, with Mikelaus precariously balanced on top. The



woman joined a second pole to the first; Mikelaus was raised even higher, the man controlling the swaying pole with sidling movements. The woman added a third extension to the pole; Mikelaus was raised twenty feet into the air. Gingerly he rose and stood on the board, atop the swaying pole. The woman sounded a flourish of tones on a set of pipes and Mikelaus chanted a song in a reedy rasping voice:

*Ecce voluspo, Sorarsio normal,  
Radne malengro.*

*Oh! Oh! Toomish! Geltner givim.*

*(The woman blew a flourish on the*

*pipes.)*

*Bowner buder diper, Eljus noop or  
bark, Esgracio delila.*

*Oh! Oh! Toomish! Silvish givim.*

*(The woman blew a flourish on the  
pipes.)*

*Slova solypa, Trater no bulditch,  
Ki-yi-yi minkins.*

*Regular toomish. Copriote givim.*

The woman blew a final flourish and called out: "Bravo, Mikelaus! Your song has moved us all and you well deserve a liberal reward! Now you may descend!

So then: ooops! Ah la la la! And away!"

The man ran forward three short steps, heaved on the pole; Mikelaus hurtled through the air. The woman ran below with a net, but along the way she tripped over a dog and Mikelaus, consternation on his face, struck the ground headfirst, to tumble over and over a distance of twenty feet.

The woman put a good face on the mistake. "Next time we will surely do better! Now then, Mikelaus: to business!"

Mikelaus struggled to his feet and, removing his cap, limped back toward

the spectators, pausing only to kick the dog.

"Hah!" said Sir Pom-Pom. "Another fine trick!"

"Come!" said Madouc. "We have watched enough of this man capering. It is time we were back on the road!"

"Not yet," said Sir Pom-Pom. "The booths yonder look in teresting; surely we can spare a moment or two."

Madouc acceded to Sir Pom-Pom's wishes, and they walked around the square, inspecting the merchandise offered for sale.

At an ironmonger's booth, Sir Pom-Pom paused to study a display of fancy cutlery. A group of damascene daggers in carved leather scabbards caught his eye and he went so far as to inquire prices. Finally, after cogitation, he settled upon one of the daggers and prepared to make the purchase. Madouc spoke in shocked wonder. "May I ask what you are proposing to do?"

"Is it not clear?" blurted Sir Pom-Pom. "I badly need a dagger, of good quality and handsome workmanship. This article exactly fits my needs."

"And how will you pay?"

Sir Pom-Pom blinked up toward the sky. "I have kept a small reserve for just such a case as this."

"Before you buy so much as a nut to crack between your teeth, we must have an accounting. Show me your reserve."

"This is an embarrassment!" stormed Sir Pom-Pom. "I am now held in contempt by the ironmonger!"

"No matter! Bring out this so-called reserve."

"Let us be reasonable! The money is safer with me! I am older than you and neither vague nor absentminded. No cut-

purse would dare approach me, especially if he saw a fine dagger at my belt. It is only prudent that I carry the money and plan the expenditures."

"Your arguments are wise," said Madouc. "They fall short only because the money is mine."

Sir Pom-Pom angrily passed over a goodly handful of coins, both silver and copper. "Take the money, then!"

Something in Sir Pom-Pom's manner aroused Madouc's suspicions. She held out her hand. "Give me the remainder."

Sir Pom-Pom grudgingly handed over

further coins. "Now then!" said Madouc. "Is that all?"

Sir Pom-Pom sourly showed her a silver form and a few coppers. "I retain only my reserve. This money at least will be safe."

"And that is all?"

"That is all, and be damned to it."

"You will not need that fancy dagger. In the first place, it is far too dear."

"Not when purchased with your money."

Madouc ignored the remark. "Come! Let us be away!"



"I am hungry," grumbled Sir Pom-Pom. "We could make our lunch on one of those pork pies. Also I want to watch the clowns. Look at them now! They throw Mikelaus high in the air and let him drop. No! At the last instant the man catches him in the net! It is most comical!"

"Come, Sir Pom-Pom. You shall have your pork pie and then we will be on our way. Juno's only gait is a slow amble; we must ride long to ride far."

Sir Pom-Pom jerked peevishly at the bill of his new cap. "The day is growing late! We should bide here overnight at

one of the inns. Then we can enjoy the fair at our leisure."

"The inns are surely full; we will go on."

"That is folly! The next town is ten miles distant; we will never arrive before nightfall, and once again the inns may be full."

"In that case, we shall sleep in the open, like true vagabonds."

Sir Pom-Pom had nothing more to say; the two departed Abatty Dell and proceeded on their way. As the sun dropped low in the west, they turned aside from the lane and rode a quarter-

mile across a meadow to a little spinney beside a stream. Here Sir Pom-Pom struck up a fire and tethered out the horses, while Madouc toasted bacon, which they ate for their supper along with bread and cheese.

Madouc had removed her hat. Sir Pom-Pom studied her in the firelight.

"Somehow you look different! Now I see! You have cut your hair short."

"How else would it fit under the cap?"

"You look more halfling now than ever."

Madouc sat hugging her knees and looking into the fire. Somewhat wistfully

she said: "It is only appearance. With each passing day my human blood sings a louder song. That is always the way when one like myself leaves the shee and lives among men."

"And if you had remained at the shee: what then?"

Madouc hugged her knees even more closely. "I do not know what would have become of me. The fairies might have played tricks on me and shunned me because of my mixed blood."

"Still, mortals die, and fairies dance and play forever."

"Not so," said Madouc. "Fairies also die. Sometimes they sing sad songs by moonlight and pine away for sheer sorrow! Sometimes they drown themselves for love. Sometimes they are killed by raging bumblebees or kidnapped and murdered by trolls who grind fairy-bones into a condiment to season their sauces and ragouts."

Sir Pom-Pom yawned and stretched his legs toward the fire. "It is not the life for me, after all."

"Nor for me," said Madouc. "Already I am far too human!" In the morning the sun rose bright into a cloudless sky, and the day became warm. Halfway through

the morning they came to a river, and Madouc could not resist the temptation to bathe. She left Sir Pom-Pom with the horses and scrambled down through the alders to the water's edge. Here she removed her clothes and plunged into the water, to dive and splash and enjoy the refreshing coolness. Chancing to look up the bank, she discovered Sir Pom-Pom peering down at her, his face framed by the foliage.

In a cross voice Madouc called out: "What are you gaping at, Sir Pom-Pom? Have you never seen a naked girl before?"

"Never a naked princess," said Sir Pom-

Pom with a grin.

"That is sheer nonsense," said Madouc in disgust. "We are much alike, all of us. There is truly nothing noteworthy to see."

"Still, I prefer it to looking at the back end of Juno."

"Stare as you like," said Madouc. "I cannot be bothered with your foolishness."

"It is not total foolishness, as you put it," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I have a sound and practical reason for making a close inspection."

"What is that?"

"Should I return with the Holy Grail, my boon might entitle me to wed the royal princess. Therefore I thought it sensible to discover just what advantages such a choice might entail. For a fact, I see nothing which arouses any great enthusiasm."

Madouc struggled for words. At last she said: "Since you seem to be idle, I suggest that you strike up a fire and boil us a soup for our noon meal."

Sir Pom-Pom drew his face back through the foliage. Madouc stepped from the water, dressed and returned to the road.



As the two sat in the shade of a great elm tree, eating their soup, they observed the approach of three persons on foot: a short plump man, a woman of similar proportions and an urchin, undersized, pasty-gray of skin, seemingly all legs and head. As they drew close, Madouc recognized the three clowns who had performed at the Abatty Dell fair.

The three approached and halted. "A very good day to you both," said the man, who had a round face, coarse black hair, a little bulb of a nose and bright protuberant black eyes.

"I echo this sentiment," declared the woman, who like the man showed a

round flexible face, black hair, round black eyes and a pink stub of a nose.

"Good day to you as well," said Madouc.

The man glanced into the pot where simmered the soup. "May we sit here in the shade and take a brief respite from our trudging?"

"The shade is free," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Rest where you like."

"Your words falls kindly on the ear!" said the woman gratefully. "The way is long and I go with difficulty, and sometimes pain, by reason of my

ailment."

The three settled cross-legged in the shade. "Allow me to make introductions," said the man. "I am Filemon, Master of Mirth. Here sits Dame Corcas, no less skilled in merry antics. And here, small but doughty, is our little Mikelaus. He is not altogether cheerful, and perhaps somewhat ill, since he has had no breakfast today. Am I right, poor Mikelaus, sad little tyke that you are?"

"Arum. Boskatch. Gaspa confaga."

Sir Pom-Pom blinked. "What did he say?"

Filemon chuckled. "Mikelaus has an odd way of speaking, which is not clear to everyone."

Dame Corcas explained, with delicate precision: "He inquired, quite clearly: 'What is cooking in the pot?'"

"It is our meal," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I have boiled up a soup of ham, onions and beans."

Mikelaus spoke again: "Vogenard. Fistilla."

Filemon said reprovingly: "Impossible, Mikelaus! It is not our food, no matter how much you crave sustenance."

Dame Corcas said: "Perhaps these kind folk might spare him just a taste, to keep the spirit of life awake in his poor little soul."

Madouc said: "I suppose that is possible. Sir Pom-Pom, serve a portion of soup to the creature."

Sir Pom-Pom glumly did as bidden. Dame Corcas reached to take the bowl. "I must make sure that it is not too hot; other wise Mikelaus will burn himself." She spooned up a portion of the soup, along with a goodly chunk of ham and tested it. "It is still far too hot for Mikelaus!"

Filemon scoffed at her caution.

"Probably not! Mikelaus has the gut of a salamander! Let me verify the temperature." He took the bowl and raised it to his lips. "That is excellent soup, but you are right; it is far too hot for Mikelaus."

"There is little left in the bowl," said Sir Pom-Pom.

Mikelaus said: "Gamkarch noop. Bosumelists."

"You must not be greedy!" admonished Dame Corcas. "This young gentleman will surely make up more soup if there is not enough."

Madouc, seeing the way the wind blew, heaved a sigh. "Very well, Sir Pom-Pom. Serve around the soup. I cannot eat with these hungry creatures watching my every mouthful."

Sir Pom-Pom growled: "I made only enough for our needs."

"No problem whatever!" declared Filemon with enthusiasm. "When good comrades meet along the road, they share each with each, and all rejoice in mutual amplitude! I notice yonder a fine butt of ham, onions, bread, cheese, and unless my eyes deceive me, a bottle of wine! We shall have a true banquet, here along the road, to which each shall give

of his best! Corcas, you must make yourself useful! Assist this young gentleman with the fine boots!"

Dame Corcas sprang to her feet, and so swiftly that Sir Pom Pom could hardly follow the movement of her hands, she had thrown great chunks of ham into the pot, along with half a dozen onions, and three handfuls of oaten flour. While Sir Pom-Pom and Madouc watched in bemusement, Filemon had brought out the bottle of wine, and had tasted its contents.

Mikelaus said: "Arum. Cangel."

"Why not?" said Filemon. "You are



poor, miserable, and misshapen, and only two feet tall; still, why should you not enjoy a sip of wine from time to time, along with the rest of your merry comrades?" He passed the bottle to Mikelaus, who tilted it high into the air.

"Enough!" cried Dame Corcas. "While I stand here stirring the pot, and smoke finding the sure way to my eyes, you two consume all the wine! Put the bottle aside! Entertain these two fine folk with your jolly antics."

"Just one more swallow," begged Filemon. "It will lubricate my lips for the fife."

He drank more wine, then brought a fife from his pocket. "Now then, Mikelaus! You must earn your soup! Show us your best hornpipe!"

Filemon played a lively tune, of skirling runs and quick returns, with trills high and warbles low, while Mikelaus danced a wild jig of kicking legs and knees brought high, ending all with a forward and backward somersault.

"Good work, Mikelaus!" cried Dame Corcas. "Perhaps our friends will favor you with a coin or two, as is the habit of the gentry!"

Sir Pom-Pom growled: "Be content that

you devour our food and swill our wine."

Filemon put on a face of moist reproach, his eyes large and round. "We are comrades of the road-vagabonds of the same far horizons! Is it not share with one, share with all? Those are the rules of the gallant wayfarers!"

"If this is true, I prefer otherwise," muttered Sir Pom-Pom. Dame Corcas emitted a sudden groan. "Ah! How the pangs do bite! It is my ailment; I have overexerted myself, as is my wont! Always I do too much for others! Filemon, my potion: where is it?"

"In your pouch, my dear, as always!"

"Ah indeed! I must limit my exertions, or I may well become ill!"

Sir Pom-Pom said: "We saw you at the fair. You were bounding about with great agility. Filemon threw Mikelaus high in the air, and you ran like the wind to catch him in the net."

Mikelaus said: "Gurgo arraska, selvo sorarsio!" Dame Corcas said: "Yes, it was a shameful failure, for which we can blame the dog."

"Bismal darstid: mango ki-yi-yi."

"Whatever the case," said Dame Corcas, "the trick takes much out of me! I suffer for days afterward, but our public demands the spectacle; they know us of yore and we cannot disappoint them!"

Filemon chuckled. "There is a variation to the trick, wherein we pretend to be three incompetent lunatics and purposely let

Mikelaus fall, though pretending to catch him, but failing through one or another of our comic antics."

"Dasa miago lou-lou. Yi. Tinka."

"Just so!" said Filemon. "And the soup is

now prepared to Dame Corcas' exacting standards. I serve you with our compliments! Eat hearty, one and all! Even you, Mikelaus; for once in your penurious little life, you shall sup your fill!"

"Arum."

After the meal, Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom prepared to continue on their way. Filemon called in a cheery voice: "If we may, we will go in your company, and thus enliven the journey!"

"Of course we shall!" said Dame Corcas definitely. "It would be sad indeed if we were to part company now, after such a

jolly time together."

"Then it is so decided, by popular vote!" declared Filemon.

"We shall go as a little group of boon companions," declared Dame Corcas.

"Even though you two ride fine horses while we must walk-or in the case of poor raggle-taggle little Mikelaus, scurry and lope. Be brave, good Mikelaus! Someday the world will turn right for you, and give you a fine reward for all your generous deeds."

"Yi arum bosko."

The group set off down the lane: Sir

Pom-Pom riding first on gray Fustis, with Madouc next on Juno, at a gait sufficiently easy that Filemon and Dame Corcas, trudging behind, had no difficulty in keeping pace, and even Mikelaus, by dint of first running at full speed, then halting to catch his breath, remained only a few yards behind.

The lane wound up hill and down dale: between hedges of hawthorn or low fences of mossy fieldstone; past vineyards and orchards, fields of barley and water-meadows sprinkled with flowers; into the shade of small forests, then once more out into the open sunlight.



All at once, after two hours of travel, Dame Corcas gave a choking cry and, clutching her chest, fell to her knees, where she remained, sobbing under her breath. Filemon instantly went to tend her. "My dear Corcas, what is it this time? Another of your attacks?"

Dame Corcas at last managed to speak. "I fear as much. Luckily, it does not seem truly severe, and I do not need my potion. Still, for a period I am obliged to rest. You and dear Mikelaus must go on to Biddle Bray without me, and make arrangements for the gala. When I am better I will creep on alone at my own pace, and eventually, if the Fates are

kind, I will arrive in time to do my stint at the performance."

"Unthinkable!" declared Filemon staunchly. "Surely there is a better solution to the problem! Let us take the advice of our friends." He addressed Sir Pom-Pom. "What is your opinion?"

"I would not wish to offer advice."

Filemon struck his fist into the palm of his hand. "I have it!" He turned to Madouc. "Perhaps you, in your kindness, might allow Dame Corcas to ride in your place onward to Biddle Bray, which lies along the road at no great distance."

"It would be most companionable and loyal," cried Dame Corcas fervently. "I fear that otherwise I might just lie here in the road all night, until my strength returns."

Madouc glumly dismounted. "I suppose it will do me no great harm to walk for a bit."

"I thank you, from the bottom of my heart!" cried Dame Corcas. With surprising agility she stepped to Juno's side and swung herself into the saddle. "Ah! I feel better already! Filemon, shall we sing a brave little song, to bolster our spirits?"

"Of course, my dear! What shall it be?"

" 'The Song of the Three Merry Vagabonds', of course."

"Very good." Filemon clapped his hands to establish the cadence; then, in his gustful baritone mingled with Dame Corcas' piping soprano, the song was rendered:

*Our wants are many, our farthings  
few;*

*And oft we sleep in the rain and  
dew!*

*Our evening meal is a turnip stew;*

*In spite of all we're a jolly crew!*

*Refrain (as sung by Mikelaus):*

*Sigmo chaska yi yi yi*

*Varmous varmous oglethorpe.*

*Our argosies ride distant tides;*

*Out there somewhere our fortune  
hides.*

*Though pain seems what our life  
provides*

*Our dauntless doctrine still  
abides!*

*Refrain (as sung by Mikelaus):*

*Poxin mowgar yi yi yi*

*Vilish hoy kazinga.*

*The land is broad, the sky is vast!*

*We travel far, but not too fast.*

*The dogs bark loud as we walk  
past;*

*At night the owls fly off aghast.*

*Refrain (sung by Mikelaus):*

*Varmous toigal yi yi yi*

*Tinkish wombat nip.*

So went the ballad for sixteen more verses, with Mikelaus in each case croaking a refrain from the road behind.

Other songs were sung, with such gusto that Madouc at last called up to Dame Corcas: "You seem to have recovered your strength."

"To some extent, my dear! But it is verging into the afternoon, and now I must take my potion to prevent a new attack.

I believe that I have the packet ready to hand." Dame Corcas searched her

pouch, then gave a cry of consternation.  
"This is

a dreadful discovery!"

"What now, my dear?" cried Filernon.

"I left my potion at the spot where we made our meal! I remember distinctly tucking the packet into the crotch of the elm tree."

"That is most inconvenient! You must have your potion, if you are to survive the night!"

"There is only one solution!" said Dame Corcas decisively.



"I will ride back at speed for the potion. Meanwhile, you must continue to the old hut where once before we passed the night; it lies only a mile or so ahead. You may prepare us all nice beds of straw, and I will be back with you surely before the sun sets."

"It seems the only way," said Filemon. "Ride at best speed; still, do not founder the horse, gallant beast though it may be!"

"I know how to get the most out of such an animal," said Dame Corcas. "I will see you anon!" She turned back down the road, and kicked up Juno first into a trot, then into a warbling gallop, and soon

disappeared from view, while Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom watched nonplussed.

"Come then," said Filemon. "As Dame Corcas mentioned, there is a deserted hut a short distance ahead, which will provide us a kindly shelter for the night."

The group continued, with Sir Pom-Pom, on Fustis, leading the way. Twenty minutes later they came upon a desolate old crofter's hut, situated a few yards off the road in the shade of two sprawling oak trees.

"Here we are," said Filemon. "It is not a palace, but it is better than nothing, and clean straw is to be had in the rick."

He turned to Mikelaus who had been trying to engage his attention. "What is it now, Mikelaus?"

"Fidix. Waskin. Bolosio."

Filemon stared down at him in shock. "Can it be true?"

"Arum. Fooner."

"I cannot recall the act! Still I will search my wallet." Almost at once Filemon discovered a packet tied in black cord. "Mikelaus, you are right! I absentmindedly took up Dame Corcas' potion and dropped it into my pouch! And now the poor creature will be in a

dreadful state! She will never give up her search while the light persists, and the worry may bring on a severe attack; you will recall that episode at Cwimbry."

"Arum."

"There is no help for it! I must ride to find her, so that she will not be in an agony of despair. Luckily, the way is not long." He turned to Sir Pom-Pom. "Sir, I must beg the use of your horse Fustis! I take the blame for the entire inconvenience! But Mikelaus will make himself handy during my short absence. Mikelaus, hear me now and hear me well! I do not want to learn of your

shirking! Show this gentleman to the hayrick, then gather sticks for a fire. Further, I entrust you with a jar of my special wax. I want you to polish this gentleman's boots, and polish them until they shine like glass. It is the very least you can do for our friends until I return with Dame Corcas!" He sprang into the saddle which Sir Pom-Pom had only just vacated and galloped off down the road.

"Hoy!" called Sir Pom-Pom after him. "At least leave behind the saddlebags, that we may make our supper in your absence!"

But Filemon failed either to hear or to heed and was soon lost to sight.

Sir Pom-Pom looked into the hut, then backed away. "I believe that I will sleep out in the open, where the must is less intense."

"I will do likewise, since the night promises to be fine," said Madouc.

Sir Pom-Pom and Mikelaus brought straw from an old rick and laid it down to make soft sweet-smelling beds. Then Sir Pom-Pom struck up a fire, but without saddlebags they could only look glumly into the flames and wait with what patience they could muster for the return of Filemon and Dame Corcas with their horses.

The sun sank low and disappeared behind the far hills. Sir Pom-Pom went to look along the road but discovered neither sight nor sound of either Dame Corcas or Filemon.

He returned to the fire and pulled off his boots. Mikelaus at once took them aside and began to polish them, using Filemon's special wax. Sir Pom-Pom spoke in surly tones: "I do not care to sit up until midnight. I will now lie down to sleep, which is the best remedy for an empty stomach."

"I believe I will do the same," said Madouc. "Mikelaus may well stay up to wait; he has the polishing of your boots

to occupy his time."

For a period Madouc lay awake watching the stars drift past overhead, but at last her eyelids became heavy and she fell asleep. And so the night passed.

In the morning Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom arose from their beds of straw and looked about. There was no sign of either Filemon, Dame Corcas, or the horses. When they looked for Mikelaus, he also was not in evidence, nor were Sir Pom-Pom's boots.

Madouc said: "I am commencing to wonder about the honesty of Filemon and Dame Corcas."



"Do not leave that impling Mikelaus out of your calculations," said Sir Pom-Pom through gritted teeth. "It is clear that he has decamped with my new boots."

Madouc drew a deep breath. "I suppose it is futile to lament our loss. At Biddle Bray we will buy you stout buskins and a pair of good stockings. Until then you must go barefoot."

## II

Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom trudged glumly into Biddle Bray; even the red feather in Sir Pom-Pom's cap had taken on a disconsolate slant. At the Dog's

Head Inn they ate pease porridge for breakfast, after which, at a cobbler's shop, Sir Pom-Pom was fitted with a pair of buskins. When the cobbler called for his money, Sir Pom-Pom pointed to Madouc. "You must discuss the matter with her."

Madouc stared at him in displeasure. "How so?"

"Because you have insisted upon carrying the funds."

"What of the silver form and the three copper pennies?"

Sir Pom-Pom's face became bleak. "I

placed three coins in my pouch, which I tied to the pommel of my saddle.

Filemon jumped on Fustis and rode off like a whirlwind, and with him horse, pouch and money."

Madouc, restraining comment, paid the cobbler. "The past is past. Let us be on our way."

The two adventurers departed Biddle Bray by Bidbottle Lane, which led north toward Modoiry, a village on Old Street. After a mile or two Sir Pom-Pom recovered something of his bravado. He began to whistle and presently he said: "You spoke correctly! The past is past; today is today! The road is open; the sun

shines bright, and somewhere the Holy Grail awaits my coming!"

"So it may be," said Madouc.

"Footing it is not so bad," Pom-Pom went on. "I see many advantages. Fodder and drench no longer concern us nor the nuisances of tether, bridle, blanket and saddle. We can also put aside all fear of horse thieves."

"Whatever the case, horseback or afoot, it is no great distance to Thripsey Shee," said Madouc.

"Even so, that need not be our first destination," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I am

anxious to search for the Holy Grail:  
first in

the crypts on Weamish Isle, where I  
suspect we will find a secret  
compartment."

Madouc responded with decision: "First  
we fare to Thripsey Shee, and there we  
will take advice from my mother."

Sir Pom-Pom scowled and kicked at a  
pebble.

"It serves no purpose to pout and sulk,"  
said Madouc. "We shall keep a vigilant  
watch to right and left as we go."

Sir Pom-Pom turned a sullen sideglance upon Madouc. "Your cap is pulled low and rests on your ears and nose. I wonder how you can see the road in front of your feet, much less the landscape to right and left."

"You watch the landscape and I will guide us to Thripsey Shee," said Madouc. "And now what I see ahead is a blackberry thicket heavy with fruit. It would be a shame to pass by without a taste."

Sir Pom-Pom pointed. "Someone already works at the harvest. He may even be on guard against vagabonds such as our selves."

Madouc scrutinized the person to whom Sir Pom-Pom had referred. "I would take him for a kindly old gentleman out for

a stroll, who has paused to pick a few berries into his hat. Still, I will ask as to the berries."

Madouc approached the thicket, where a man of mature years, in costume characteristic of the lesser gentry, paused at his work. Weather and sun had browned his skin and bleached his hair; his features were undistinguished, though even and regular; the gaze of his gray eyes was mild, so that Madouc felt no hesitation in addressing him. "Sir, are

these berries under your control, or are they available to others?"

"I must answer both 'yes' and 'no'. For berries already picked and in my hat I feel an attachment. Those berries yet on the bush I place under no restriction whatever."

"In that case I will pick a few berries on my account, as will Sir Pom-Pom."

'Sir Pom-Pom', is it? Since I mingle with the aristocracy, he I must look to my manners."

"I am not truly a knight," said Sir Pom-Pom modestly. "It is only a manner of



speaking."

"Here among the bushes it matters little," said the old man. "Knight and commoner alike cry 'Ay caray!' at the prick of a

thorn, and the favor is the same on both tongues. As for me, my name is Travante; my rank or its lack are equally irrelevant." Travante looked down at Madouc, who picked from a branch nearby. "Below that cap I seem to notice red curls, and also some extremely blue eyes."

"My hair is more copper-gold then red."

"So I see, upon closer attention. And

what is your name?"

"I am Madouc."

The three picked blackberries, then sat together by the side of the road and ate their harvest. Travante asked: "Since you came from the south, you are faring to the north. Where are you bound?"

"First to Modoiry on Old Street," said Madouc. "Truth to tell, we are vagabonds of a sort, Sir Pom-Pom and I, and each of us has a quest to fulfill."

"I too am a vagabond," said Travante. "I too pursue a quest - one which is futile and forlorn, or so I have been told by

those who remain at home. If I may, I will accompany you, at least for a space."

"Do so and welcome," said Madouc. "What is the quest that takes you so far and wide?"

Travante looked off down the road, smiling. "It is an extraordinary quest. I am searching for my lost youth."

"Indeed!" said Madouc. "How did you lose it?" Travante held out his hands in a gesture of puzzlement. "I cannot be sure. I had it one moment and the next time I thought to notice it was gone."

Madouc glanced at Sir Pom-Pom, who was staring dumbfounded at Travante. She said: "I suppose you are sure of your facts."

"Oh indeed! I remember it distinctly! Then it was as if I walked around the table and poof! I found myself an old man."

"There must have been the usual and ordinary intervals in between?"

"Dreams, my dear. Figments, wisps, sometimes a nightmare. But what of you?"

"It is simple. I do not know my father.

My mother is a fairy from Thripsey  
Shee. I am seeking my father and with  
him my pedigree."

"And Sir Pom-Pom: what does he seek?"

"Sir Pom-Pom seeks the Holy Grail, in  
accordance with King Casmir's  
proclamation."

"Ah! He is of religious persuasion?"

"Not so," said Sir Pom-Pom. "If I bring  
the Holy Grail to Queen Sollace, she  
will grant me a boon. I might well  
choose to marry the Princess Madouc,  
though she is as high-handed and vain as  
the artful little frippet who sits beside

you now."

Travante glanced down at Madouc.

"Could she possibly be one and the same individual?"

Sir Pom-Pom put on his most portentous frown. "There are certain facts we do not want generally known. Still, I can say this: you have guessed a good guess."

Madouc told Travante: "Another fact is not generally known, especially to Sir Pom-Pom. He must learn that his dreams of marriage and the boon have nothing to do with me."

Sir Pom-Pom said obstinately: "I can only rely upon the assurances of Queen Sollace in this regard."

"So long as I control the Tinkle-toe Imp-spring, I will have the last word in this matter," said Madouc. She rose to her feet. "It is time we were on our way."

Travante said: "Sir Pom-Pom. I strongly suspect that you will never marry Madouc. I advise you to work toward a more accessible goal."

"I will give the matter thought," growled Sir Pom-Pom. The three set off to the north along Bidbottle Lane. "We make a notable company," declared Travante. "I

am as I am! Sir Pom-Pom is strong and brave, while Madouc is clever and resourceful; also, with her copper-gold curls, her wry little face and her eyes of heartbreak blue she is both quaint and vastly appealing."

"She can also be a vixen, when it suits her mood," said Sir Pom-Pom.

### III

Bidbottle Lane wound north across the countryside: up hill and down dale, into the shade of the Wanswold Oaks, out across Scrimsour Downs. Overhead floated lazy white clouds; their shadows drifted across the landscape. The sun



moved up the sky; as it reached the zenith, the three wayfarers arrived at Modoiry, where Bidbottle Lane met Old Street. Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom would proceed another three miles east to Little Saffield, then fare north beside the River Timble and on to the Forest of Tantrevalles. Travante intended to continue past Little Saffield to the Long Downs, that he might conduct his search among the dolmens of the Stollshot Circus.

As the three approached Little Saffield Madouc found herself increasingly disturbed by the prospect of parting with Travante, whose company she found both reassuring and amusing; further, his

presence seemed to discourage Sir Pom-Pom's occasional tendencies toward pomposity. Madouc finally suggested that Travante accompany them, at least as far as Thripsey Shee.

Travante reflected upon the proposal. Then, somewhat dubiously, he said: "I know nothing of halflings; indeed, all my life I have been wary of them. Too many tales are told of their caprice and exaggerated conduct."

"In this case there is nothing to fear," said Madouc confidently. "My mother is both gracious and beautiful! She will surely be delighted to see me, and my friends as well, though I admit this is

less certain. Still, she might well advise you in regard to your quest."

Sir Pom-Pom asked plaintively: "What of me? I also am engaged upon a quest."

"Patience, Sir Pom-Pom! Your wants are known!"

Travante came to a decision. "Well then, why not? I will welcome any advice, since I have had precious little luck searching on my own."

"Then you will come with us!"

"For just a bit, until you find me a bore."

"I doubt if that will ever occur," said

Madouc. "I enjoy your company, and I am sure that Sir Pom-Pom does so as well."

"Really?" Travante looked half-incredulously from one to the other. "I consider myself drab and uninteresting."

"I would never use those words," said Madouc. "I think of you as a dreamer, perhaps a trifle-let us say-impractical, but your ideas are never dull."

"I am pleased to hear you say so. As I mentioned, I have no great opinion of myself."

"Whyever not?"

"For the most ordinary of reasons: I excel in nothing. I am neither a philosopher, nor a geometer, nor yet a poet. Never have I destroyed a horde of savage enemies, nor built a noble monument, nor ventured to the far places of the world. I lack all grandeur."

"You are not alone," said Madouc. "Few can claim such achievements."

"That means naught to me! I am I; I answer to myself, with no heed for others. I am persuaded that a life-span should not be futile and empty! For this reason I seek my lost youth, and with such special zeal."

"And if you were to find it, what would you do?"

"I would alter everything! I would become a person of enterprise; I would consider wasted the day that did not include the contriving of some wonderful plan, or the building of a fine object, or the righting of a wrong! So would pass each day, in marvellous deeds. Then each night I would gather my friends for an occasion which would be remembered forever! That is how life should be lived, to the best effort of one's power! Now that I know the truth, the time is too late-unless I find what I seek."

Madouc turned to Sir Pom-Pom. "Have you been paying heed? These are lessons which you should take to heart, if only so that someday you may avoid Travante's regrets."

"It is a sound philosophy," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I have occasionally thought along similar lines. However, while toiling at the royal stables I could not put such theories into effect. If I find the Holy Grail and earn a boon, I will take pains to live a more glorious life."

The three had now arrived at Little Saffield. The time was halfway through the afternoon: too late to proceed farther. The three repaired to the Black Ox Inn,

to find all rooms occupied. They were given a choice of straw pallets in the garret among the rats, or the loft above the bar, where they might sleep in the hay, which option they selected.

In the morning the three set off to the north up Timble Lane. They passed first through the village Tawn Timble, then the hamlet Glymwode, with the Forest of Tantrevalles a brooding dark line close ahead.

In a field they found a peasant digging turnips, who gave directions to Thripsey Shee on Madling Meadow. "It is not so far as the dog runs, but the lane winds and crooks, all the while taking you



more deeply into the forest, meanwhile becoming no more than a track. You will come at last to a woodcutter's hut; thereafter the track becomes a trace, but you must proceed farther still, until the forest breaks, and before you will be Madling Meadow."

"That seems simple enough," said Travante.

"So it is, but beware of the fairies of the shee! Above all, do not loiter after dusk or the imps will do you a mischief. They put donkey's ears and a donkey's utensil on poor Fottem, all because he made water on the meadow."

"We will surely be more mannerly," said Madouc.

The three went forward; the forest loomed dark and quiet ahead. The lane, now a track, veered to the east, then turned to plunge into the forest. Branches arched overhead; foliage blocked out the sky; the open country was gone and lost to view.

The track led deep into the forest. The air became cool and carried a hundred herbal scents. In the forest all colors were altered. Greens were various: greens of moss and fern, of wort, mallow, dock and tree-leaves in the sunlight. The browns were heavy and

rich: black-brown and umber of the oak tree bole, russet and tan of forest floor. In the coverts, where the trees grew close and the foliage hung heavy, the shadows were deep, and tinged with maroon, indigo, black-green.

The three passed the woodcutter's hut; the track dwindled to a trail, winding between boles, across dim dells, over outcrops of black rock, finally a break in the trees and beyond: Madling Meadow. Madouc halted and told her companions: "You two must wait here for a time, while I go to find my mother. This will cause the least disturbance."

Sir Pom-Pom spoke in dissatisfaction.

"That may not be the best idea! I want to put my questions as soon as possible-to strike while the iron is hot, so to speak!"

"That is not the way to deal with fairies," said Madouc. "If you try to guide them, or work them to your will, they only laugh and dodge and curvet off slantwise, and may refuse to speak at all."

"At least I can ask politely if they know anything whatever of the Grail. If not, we are only wasting our time and should hasten on to Weamish Isle."

"Be patient, Sir Pom-Pom! Remember, we are dealing with fairies! You must

control your anxieties until I discover how the land lies."

Sir Pom-Pom said stiffly: "I am not a bumpkin, after all; I too know how to deal with fairies."

Madouc became vexed. "Remain here, or go back to Lyonesse Town and ask questions of your own mother!"

Sir Pom-Pom muttered: "I do not dare; she would laugh herself ill for my part in this expedition, then send me out for a bucket of moonbeams." He went to settle himself on a fallen log, where he was joined by Travante. "Be quick, if you please; and if chance allows, ask after

the Holy Grail."

"You might also allude to my quest," said Travante, "if a gap opens in the conversation."

"I will do what I can."

Madouc went warily to the edge of the forest, pausing only to remove her cap and fluff out her curls. She halted in the shade of a wide-spreading beech tree, and looked out over the meadow: a roughly circular area three hundred yards in diameter. At the center rose a hummock to which a dwarfed and contorted oak clung with sprawling roots. Madouc scanned the meadow, but

saw only flowers nodding in the breeze. Nothing could be heard but a soft murmur which might have been the sound of bees and singing insects; still Madouc knew that she was not alone, especially after a mischievous hand pinched first one cheek of her round little rump, then the other. A voice giggled; another whispered: "Green apples, green apples!"

The first voice whispered: "When will she learn?"

Madouc indignantly called out: "Trouble me not, by fairy law!"

The voices became scornful. "Hoity-

toity to boot, apart from all else!"  
sneered the first.

"She is a hard one to know!" said the  
other.

Madouc ignored the remarks. She looked  
up at the sky, and decided that the time  
was near upon noon. In a soft voice she  
called: "Twisk! Twisk! Twisk!"

A moment passed. Out on the meadow,  
as if her eyes had come into focus,  
Madouc saw a hundred filmy shapes  
moving about their unfathomable affairs.  
Above the central hummock a wisp of  
fog swirled high into the air.



Madouc waited and watched, nerves tingling. Where was Twisk? One of the shapes strolled at a languid pace across the meadow, taking on substance as it came, finally to show the charming lineaments of the fairy Twisk. She wore a knee-length gown of near-impalpable gauze which enhanced the effect of her supple and fascinating contours. Today she had selected pale lavender as a suitable color for her hair; as before it floated in a soft cloud behind her head and around her face. Madouc scanned the face anxiously, hoping for indications of maternal benevolence. Twisk's expression was impassive.

"Mother!" cried Madouc. "I am happy to

see you again!"

Twisk halted and looked Madouc up and down. "Your hair is a jackdaw's nest," said Twisk. "Where is the comb I gave you?"

Madouc said hurriedly: "Some clowns from the fair stole my horse Juno, along with saddle, saddlebag and comb."

"Clowns and entertainers are an untrustworthy lot; this should be your lesson. In any case you must make yourself tidy, especially if you plan to join the merriment at our grand festival! As you can see, the frolics are already underway."

"I know nothing of the festival, Mother dear. I had not planned merriment."

"Oh? It is to be a grand gala! Notice all the pretty arrangements!"

Madouc looked across the meadow and now everything had changed. The swirl of fog above the hummock had become a tall castle of twenty towers with long banderoles streaming from each spire. In front of the castle stanchions of twisted silver and iron were linked by festoons of flowers; they surrounded a long table heaped with delicacies and liquors in tall bottles.

The festival apparently had not yet

started, although fairies were already promenading and dancing about the meadow in great high spirits-all save one, who sat perched on a post scratching himself with great industry.

"I seem to have arrived at a happy time," said Madouc. "What is the occasion?"

"We celebrate a notable event," said Twisk. "It is the emancipation of Falael from seven long years of itch; King Throbius so punished him for malice and mischief. The curse will soon have run its course; in the meantime Falael sits yonder on the post, scratching as earnestly as ever. And now, I will bid you farewell once again, and wish you a

fortunate future."

"Wait!" cried Madouc. "Are you not pleased to see me, your own dear daughter?"

"Not altogether, if truth be told. Your birth was travail, most unsavory, and your presence reminds me of the entire revolting circumstance."

Madouc pursed her lips. "I will put it out of my mind if you will do the same."

Twisk laughed: a gay tinkle. "Well spoken! My mood is slightly alleviated! Why are you here?"

"It is the usual reason. I need a mother's advice."

"Proper and normal! Describe your trouble! Surely it is not an affair of the heart!"

"No, Mother! I only want to find my father, so that I can finally define my pedigree."

Twisk gave a plangent cry of displeasure. "The topic lacks interest! I have long put the circumstance out of my mind! I remember nothing!"

"Surely you remember something!" cried Madouc.

Twisk made an offhand gesture. "A moment of frivolity, a laugh, a kiss; why should anyone wish to catalogue these in terms of place, date, phase of the moon, details of nomenclature? Rest content with the knowledge that one such event was conducive to your being; that is enough."

"For you, but not for me! I am intent upon my identity, which means the name of my father."

Twisk gave a gurgle of mocking laughter. "I cannot even name my own father, let alone yours!"

"Still, my father brought you a lovely

child; surely that impressed your memory!"

"Hmm. One would so imagine." Twisk looked off across the meadow. "You have tickled my recollection! The occasion, so I recall, was unique. I can tell you this-" Twisk looked past Madouc into the forest. "Who are these solemn vagrants? Their presence obtrudes upon the mood of the festival!"

Madouc turned to find that Sir Pom-Pom had crept through the forest and now stood close at hand. Not far behind, but well back in the shadows, lurked Travante.



Madouc turned back to Twisk. "These are my companions; they are also embarked upon serious quests. Sir Pom-Pom seeks the Holy Grail; Travante searches for his youth, which was lost when he was not paying heed."

Twisk said haughtily: "Had you not avouched for them, they might have come to grief!"

Sir Pom-Pom, despite Madouc's glare of annoyance, stepped forward. "Dame Fairy of the Silver Eyes, allow me to put you a question, which is this: where should I seek the Holy Grail?"

"Determine its location and go to that

spot; that is my wise advice."

Travante spoke tentatively: "If you could guide me to my lost youth, I would be most grateful."

Twisk jumped high in the air, pirouetted, settled slowly to the ground. "I am not an index of the world's worries. I know nothing either of Christian crockery nor truant time! And now: silence! King Throbius has appeared and will fix his amnesty upon Falael!"

Sir Pom-Pom muttered: "I see nothing but wisps and blurs." Travante whispered in amazement: "Look again! All is coming clear! I see the castle, and

a thousand colored delights!"

"Now I see the same!" whispered Sir Pom-Pom in amazement.

"Hist! Not another sound!"

At the castle tall doors of pearl and opal swung apart; King Throbius stepped forward at a stately pace, a dozen roundfaced imps hopping behind holding the hem of his long purple train. For the occasion he wore a crown of sixteen tall silver prongs, curving outward and terminating in sparkling points of white fire.

King Throbius advanced to the

balustrade, and halted. He looked out over the meadow, where all was hushed, and even Falael desisted from his scratching long enough to look around in awe.

King Throbius held up his hand. "Today marks a significant epoch in our lives, in that it celebrates the regeneration of one of our ilk! Falael, you have erred! You have contrived ills and wrongs by the dozen, and put many of these schemes into effect! For such offenses, you have been visited with a remedial condition which at the very least has occupied your attention and brought about a welcome cessation of mischief! Now then, Falael! I asked you to address this

company, and tell them of your redemption! Speak! Are you ready to have the 'Curse of the Itch' removed?"

"I am ready!" cried Falael with fervor. "In all aspects, up and down, right and left, in and out: I am ready."

"Very well! I hereby-"

"One moment!" called Falael. "I have one particularly vexing itch I wish to subdue before the curse is removed." With great zeal Falael scratched an area along his belly. "Now then, Your Majesty. I am ready!"

"Very good! I hereby lift the curse, and I

hope, Falael, that the inconveniences of your punishment will have persuaded you

to forbearance, kindness and restraint, as well as a full terminus to your penchant for wicked tricks!"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty! All is changed! Henceforth I shall be known as Falael the Good!"

"That is a noble aspiration, which I endorse and applaud. See that you keep it always to the fore! Now then! Let the festival proceed! All must participate in Falael's joy! One last word! Yonder, so I notice, stand three wights from the

world of men - two mortals and the beloved daughter of our own dear Twisk! In the spirit of festival we give them welcome; let there be neither molestation nor prank, no matter how amusing! Today jocundity is rife, and all shall share!"

King Throbious held up his hand in salute and returned into the castle.

Madouc had been politely listening to the remarks of King Throbious; when she turned back she found Twisk had started to saunter off across the meadow. Madouc called out in distress: "Mother, where do you go?"

Twisk looked around in surprise. "I go off to rejoice with the others! There will be dancing and a great drinking of fairy wine; you have been allowed to join us; will you do so?"

"No, Mother! If I drank fairy wine, I would become giddy and who knows what might happen?"

"Well then, will you dance?"

Madouc smilingly shook her head. "I have heard that those who dance with the fairies are never able to stop. I will neither drink wine nor dance, nor will Sir Pom-Pom nor Travante."



"As you like. In that case-"

"You were about to tell me of my father!"

Sir Pom-Pom stepped forward. "You might also specify how I am to find the location of the Holy Grail, that I may go to this spot and find it."

Travante spoke more hesitantly: "I would welcome even a hint in regard to my lost youth!"

"It is all a nuisance," said Twisk fretfully. "You must wait until another time."

Madouc turned toward the castle and cried out: "King Throbius! King Throbius! Where are you? Come here, if you please, and at once!"

Twisk jerked back in consternation. "Why do you act so strangely? You lack all convention!"

A deep voice spoke; King Throbius himself stood at hand.

"Who calls my name with such unseemly shrieks, as if at the imminence of peril?"

Twisk spoke in a silken voice: "Your Majesty, it was only an excess of girlish excitement; we are sorry you were

disturbed."

"Not so," declared Madouc.

"I am puzzled," said King Throbius.

"You were not excited or you were not sorry?"

"Neither, Your Highness."

"Well then-what sent you into such frantic transports?"

"In truth, Your Highness, I wished to consult my mother in your presence, so that you might help her recollection when it faltered."

King Throbius nodded sagely. "And

what memories did you wish to explore?"

"The identity of my father and the nature of my pedigree." King Throbius looked sternly at Twisk. "As I recall, the episode was not altogether to your credit."

"It went neither one way nor the other," said Twisk, now crestfallen. "It occurred as it occurred and that was the end to it."

"And how went the details?" asked Madouc.

"It is not a tale for immature ears," said

King Throbius. "But in this case we must make an exception. Twisk, will you tell the story, or must I assume the task?"

Twisk's response was sullen. "The incidents are both ridiculous and embarrassing. They are nothing to blazon about, as if in pride, and I prefer to stand in detachment."

"Then I will recount the episode. To begin with, I will point out that embarrassment is the other face of vanity."

"I have a profound admiration for myself," said Twisk. "Is this vanity? The point is debatable."

"The term may or may not apply. I will now revert to a time some years in the past. Twisk, then as now, fancied herself a great beauty-as indeed she was and is. In her folly she teased and tormented Mangeon the troll, flaunting herself, then leaping nimbly from his grasp and taking gleeful pleasure in his expostulations. Mangeon finally became swollen with malice and decided to punish her for her tricks. One day, coming upon Twisk unaware, he seized her, dragged her up Wamble Way to Munkins Road, and chained her to Idilra Post, which stands beside the crossroad. Mangeon then cast a spell, to hold the chains secure until Twisk had persuaded three wayfarers to

engage her in erotic congress. Twisk will now elaborate upon the tale, if she is of a mind."

"I am not so of a mind," said Twisk crossly. "Still in the hope that my daughter Madouc may profit from my error, I will recount the circumstances."

"Speak on," said King Throbius.

"There is little to tell. The first to pass was the knight Sir Jaucinet of Castle Cloud in Dahaut. He was both courteous and sympathetic and would have persisted longer than was perhaps truly needful, but at last I dismissed him, since the time was close on dusk and I

wished not to discourage other wayfarers. The second to pass was Nisby, a ploughboy on his way home from the field. He was most helpful, in a rude but vigorous fashion. He wasted no time since, so he explained, he expected bacon for his supper. I was desperate to be free before nightfall and was relieved to see him depart. Alas! I was to be disappointed! Dusk became evening; the moon rose full; it shone down from the sky as bright as an escutcheon of polished silver. Now along the road came a shadowy figure, cloaked in black, with a widebrimmed hat shading his face from the moonlight, so that his features could not be discerned. He came at a slow gait, stopping every three



paces, from watchfulness, or perhaps from mindless habit. I found him bereft of all appeal, and did not call out to him that he might liberate me from the post. Nevertheless, he saw me by moonlight, and stopped short, to make an appraisal. Neither his posture nor his silence eased my misgivings; still, I could not depart by reason of the chain and its connection to Idilra Post, so I made a virtue of necessity and remained where I was. With slow and careful step the dark wayfarer approached and at last worked his will upon me. Where Nisby was abrupt and Sir Jaucinet elegant, the dark creature used a furious zeal lacking in all sentimentality, failing even to remove

his hat. Neither did he speak his name, nor so much as comment upon the weather. My response, under the circumstances, was confined to cold disdain.

"Eventually the affair ran its course and I was free. The dark creature went off through the moonlight, his gait even slower and more thoughtful than before. I hastened back to Thripsey Shee."

At this point, Queen Bossum, splendid in a gown of sapphire spangles and pale cobweb, came to join King Throbius, who turned to greet her with full gallantry. Twisk continued her tale. "In my term I was delivered of an infant,

who brought me neither pleasure nor pride, by reason of her provenance. At the first opportunity and with little remorse I changed her for the infant Dhrun, and all the rest is known."

Madouc made a sad sound. "The case is even more confused than before! To whom will I look for my pedigree? To Nisby? To Sir Jaucinet? To the dark creature of the shadows? Must it be one of these?"

"I would think so," said Twisk. "Still, I guarantee nothing."

"It is all most untidy," said Madouc.

Twisk spoke with petulance: "Then is then! Now is now, and now is the festival! Vivacity tingles in the very air; see how the fairies dance and play! Notice Falael and the merry capers he is cutting! How he enjoys his liberation!"

Madouc turned to look. "He is indeed very brisk. Still, dear Mother, before you join the revelry, I need your further advice!"

"You shall have it and gladly! I advise that you depart Madling Meadow at this very instant! The day is waning, and soon the music will start. If you loiter you might be prompted to bide here all night long to your sorrow! Therefore I

bid you fare well!"

King Throbius finished his gallant interchanges with Queen Bossum. He turned about in time to overhear Twisk's advice to Madouc, and was affected adversely. He called out: "Twisk, I bid you stay!" He strode forward, and the twelve roundfaced implets who carried his train were obliged to hop and run to keep pace.

King Throbius halted and made a stately gesture of admonition. "Twisk, your conduct, on this day of joy, strikes a discord. At Thripsey Shee 'faith', 'truth' and 'loyalty' are not just catch words to be abandoned at the first inconvenience!

You must dutifully assist your daughter, odd little crotchet though she may be!"

Twisk flung out her hands in despair.

"Sire, I have already gratified her needs to a surfeit! She arrived devoid of parents except for me, her mother; she may now select from any of three fathers, each with his distinctive pedigree. I could hardly have provided a greater choice and still retain my dignity."

King Throbius nodded in measured approval. "I commend your delicacy."

"Thank you, Your Majesty! Now may I join the company?"

"Not yet! We are agreed to this extent: Madouc has an amplitude of choice. Let us learn if she is pleasurable content."

"Not at all!" cried Madouc. "The case is worse than ever!"

"How so?"

"I have choices, but where do they lead? I shudder to think of the pedigree I might derive from the dark creature."

"Aha! I believe that I understand your dilemma!" King Throbious turned to Twisk. "Can you resolve this problem, or must I intervene?"

Twisk shrugged. "My best efforts have evidently gone for naught. Madouc, His Highness has offered assistance; I suggest that you accept, after first inquiring what he wants in return. That is a mother's sage advice."

King Throbius spoke severely: "On this day of gladness, I will do what needs to be done, and demand nothing in return! Listen then, to my instructions! Bring hither to this spot your three putative fathers: Nisby, Sir Jaucinet, and the dark creature. Stand them together side by side; I will identify your father on the instant and discover the length of his pedigree!"



Madouc reflected for a moment. "All very well, but what if the three refuse to come to Thripsey Shee?"

King Throbius reached to the ground and picked up a pebble. He touched it to his forehead, to his nose, to his chin, and finally to the point of his sharp fairy tongue. He handed the pebble to Madouc. "Whoever you touch with this stone must follow where you lead, or stand at your command, until you touch him on the backside with this same stone and cry out: 'Begone!' By this means you may induce the three to come with you."

"Thank you, Your Highness! Only one detail remains."

"What might that be?"

"Where shall I find these individuals?"

King Throbius frowned. "That is a reasonable question. Twisk, what are your concepts in this regard?"

"Your Majesty, I know nothing for certain. Nisby came from the direction of the Dillydown; Sir Jaucinet mentioned Castle

Cloud in Dahaut; as for the third I know nothing whatever."

King Throbius signalled Twisk to the side. The two conferred for several

minutes, then turned back to Madouc.  
"The problem, as always, has a solution."

"That is good news!" said Madouc. "My dear mother Twisk has volunteered to make the search?"

King Throbius held up his hand to quell Twisk's instant outcry. "The possibility was discussed, then abandoned. Our scheme is far more cunning! You shall not seek out these three individuals; instead, they shall come in search of you!"

Madouc's jaw dropped in bewilderment.  
"I do not under stand."

"This is the plan. I shall disseminate to all quarters an information. Bosnip! Where is Bosnip?"

"Here I am, Sire!"

"Make an exact record of the following decree. Are you ready?"

Bosnip the Royal Scribe produced a sheet of mulberry paper, a vial of black-beetle ink, a long quill pen. "Sire, I am ready!"

"This is the decree; write with your best flourishes":

*'Can anyone forget the penalty*

*visited upon the fairy Twisk, so proud and haughty, at Idilra Post? Now her equally beauteous daughter must also be chastened; is it not a pity? Like Twisk, she flaunted and teased, then ran off to hide. The penalty is just: like Twisk, she will be constrained to Idilra Post until liberated, as before, by some sympathetic passerby.'*

*'So say I, Throbius, of Thripsey Shee, the King.'*

Bosnip wrote with concentration, the tip of his black quill pen twitching back and forth at speed. King Throbius asked:

"You have transcribed these words?"

"Exactly, Sire!"

"That, then, shall be my decree," said King Throbius. "It shall be made known to all, save only the ogres Fuluot, Carabara, Gois and three-headed Throop. Nisby will hear, also Sir Jaucinet, and the dark creature as well, whatever his name and his nature."

As Madouc listened to the decree, her mouth had dropped open in wonder. Finally, in a choked voice, she asked: "Is this the crafty scheme, that I am to be chained to an iron post, and there subjected to unspeakable acts?"

King Throbius explained the details of his scheme in a patient if somewhat heavy voice: "It is our theory that the three persons who liberated Twisk will wish to assist you in the same fashion. When they approach intent on their good offices, you need only touch them with the pebble to bring them under your control."

Madouc discovered a flaw in the plan. "Have you not noticed? I lack the attributes of my mother Twisk! Will any of the three be inclined even to approach the post? I see them coming in haste, taking note of me, stopping short, turning and running back the way they had come, careless if I were to be liberated or not."

"The point is well taken," said King Throbius. "I will cast a glamour upon you, so that folk will be enthralled, and mistake you for a creature of allure."

"Hmmf," said Madouc. "I suppose that will have to be the way of it."

"The scheme is sound," said Twisk.

Madouc was still not totally convinced. "Might not our plans go awry in some unexpected way? Suppose the pebble lost its force, so that, willy-nilly, I was liberated even though I needed no such help?"

"It is a chance we must take," said King



Throbius. He stepped forward, fluttered his fingers over Madouc's head, muttered a cantrap of nineteen syllables, touched her chin, then stood back. "The glamour is cast. To work its effect, pull at your left ear with the fingers of your right hand. To suspend the glamour, pull at your right ear with the fingers of your left hand."

Madouc asked with interest: "Shall I try it now?"

"As you like! You will notice the change only as it affects others; you yourself will not be altered."

"For a test, then, I will try the spell."

Madouc tugged at her left ear with the fingers of her right hand, then turned to Sir Pom-Pom and Travante. "Can you notice a change?"

Sir Pom-Pom drew a deep breath and seemed to clench his teeth. "The change is definite."

Travante made a wild, if controlled, gesture. "I will describe the change. You are now a slender maiden, of perfect if not better conformation. Your eyes are as blue as the warm summer sea; they are melting and sympathetic, and look from a face tart and sweet, clever and wry, of a haunting fascination. Soft copper gold curls swing past this face;

the hair is scented with the perfume of lemon blossoms. Your form is enough to make a strong man weak. The glamour is effective."

Madouc pulled at her right ear with the fingers of her left " hand. "Am I myself again?"

"Yes," said Sir Pom-Pom regretfully.  
"You are as usual."

Madouc heaved a sigh of relief. "With the glamour upon me I feel somewhat conspicuous."

King Throbius smiled. "You must learn to ignore it, since, in your case, the

glamour is no more than a reflection of the near future." He looked up into the sky and signalled. Down flew a small green faylet with gauzy wings. King Throbius gave instructions: "Gather your cousins, fly hither and yon, ensure that all creatures of the neighborhood, save only three-headed Throop, Fuluot, Carabara, and Gois, learn the news of the decree which Bosnip will recite to you. Three especially must hear: Sir Jaucinet of Castle Cloud, the peasant Nisby, and the faceless creature who saunters abroad by moonlight wearing a broad-brimmed black hat."

The faylet was gone. King Throbius gave Madouc a grave salute. "I trust that

our little scheme fulfills its purpose, without mistakes or inconvenience. In due course-" A sudden tumult from across the meadow attracted his attention. He spoke in amazement. "Can it be? Shemus and Womin, both officials of high degree, are at odds!"

King Throbius marched off across the meadow, so swiftly that the implets who carried his train were jerked from their feet and swept through the air.

King Throbius went to where a long table had been set with a variety of fine comestibles: ichors and wines in quaint glass bottles; pastries flavored with milkweed cream and the pollen of

daffodil, buttercup and crocus; tarts of currants both black and red; candied crab apples and jellies; the crystallized nectars of sweetbriar, rose and violet. Beside the table an altercation had suddenly been transformed into a confusion of shouts, blows and curses. The parties at contention were Womin, Registrar of Rightnesses, and Shemus, Conductor of Rituals. Shemus had seized Womin's beard with one hand and was beating him over the head with a wooden mug, from which he had been drinking parsnip ale.

King Throbilus spoke sharply: "Why this sordidmoil? It is shameful conduct on a day of such happiness!"

Shemus cried out in a passion: "I would agree in all respects, Your Highness, had I not suffered an abominable affront from this rat-fanged old scavenger!"

"What are the facts? Describe your complaint!"

"Gladly! This degenerate registrar thought to work a vulgar prank upon me! When I turned away for a moment, he dropped his foul stocking into my mug of parsnip ale."

King Throbius turned to Womin. "And what was your motive?"

"I had no motive!"

"None?"

"None! For this reason: I was not a party to the deed! The accusation is a canard! Yonder sits Falael, who witnessed the whole episode; he will attest to my innocence!"

King Throbius swung about. "Well then, Falael: let us hear your testimony."

"I was weaving a daisy chain," said Falael. "My attention was fixed upon my work; I saw nothing germane to the case."

"Nonetheless, I am guiltless," declared Womin. "In view of my reputation, only



a person with pot cheese for brains could think otherwise."

"Not so!" stormed Shemus. "If you are innocent, why are you wearing a single stocking? Why does the stocking I found in my ale show the same puce color as that on your leg?"

"It is a mystery!" stated Womin. "Your Highness, hear me out! The party at fault is this ale-swilling old toad, who stands here fulminating like a mad thing! He struck me several stout blows, meanwhile drenching my stocking in his revolting tippie, into which he had undoubtedly snuffled and sniffed."

Shemus jumped up and down in fury. "That remark is a further provocation, worth at least two more blows!" Shemus would have chastised Womin further had not King Throbius stepped forward.

"Desist from this folly! Evidently a mistake has been made; let us carry the case no further!"

Womin and Shemus turned their backs on each other and peace was restored. King Throbius returned across the meadow. He spoke to Madouc. "I will bid you farewell, for the nonce. When you return with your three gentlemen-in-waiting, as we must call them, then we shall prove identities to your full

satisfaction, and you will know your pedigree."

Sir Pom-Pom could no longer restrain his own urgencies. "Please, Your Highness! I too need instruction! How shall I find the Holy Grail?"

King Throbius looked in puzzlement to Twisk. "What might be the 'Holy Grail'?"

"I have heard mention of the object, Your Highness. Long ago Sir Pellinore spoke of such an article. I believe it to be a cup, or something of the sort."

"It is a chalice sacred to the Christians,"

said Sir Pom-Pom. "I am anxious to find it, that I may earn a royal boon."

King Throbius pulled at his beard. "I know nothing of such an object; you must seek elsewhere for information."

Travante also made bold to put a request: "Perhaps Your Highness will instruct me as to where I might search for my lost youth."

King Throbius again pulled at his beard. "Was it mislaid or truly lost? Do you remember any of the pertinent circumstances?"

"Unfortunately not, Your Highness. I had

it; I lost it; it was gone."

King Throbius gave his head a dubious shake. "After such long neglect, it might be almost anywhere. As you travel the roads, you must keep on the alert. I can tell you this: if you find it, be nimble indeed!" King Throbius reached high into the air and brought down a silver hoop two feet in diameter. "If you find what you seek, capture it with this hoop. It was once the property of the nymph Atalanta, and is in itself a great curiosity."

"I thank Your Highness." Travante placed the hoop carefully over his shoulder.

King Throbius and Queen Bossum gave stately bows of farewell and strolled away across the meadow. Even as they went a new commotion broke out near the long table, again involving Womin. The activity consisted of screams, outcries and angry gesticulations. It appeared that someone, both cunning and deft, had purloined Womin's single remaining stocking and had affixed it to the crest of the chatelaine Batinka's elaborate coiffure, where it created a ridiculous and humiliating spectacle. Batinka, upon discovering the prank, had chided Womin and had tweaked his nose. The usually mild-mannered Womin, after taking Falael's quiet

advice, had retaliated by pushing Batinka's face into a pudding. At this point King Throbius intervened. Batinka cited Womin's misdeeds which Womin denied, save for his use of the pudding. Once again he asserted that Falael could bear witness as to his blamelessness. King Throbius, as before, turned to Falael for the facts, but Falael, as before, claimed to have been preoccupied with his daisy chain, to the exclusion of all else.

King Throbius considered the case for a moment or two, then turned to Falael: "Where is the daisy chain upon which you have been so diligently employed?"

Falael was taken aback by the unexpected request. He looked here and there and at last cried out: "Aha! Here it is!"

"Indeed. You are certain?"

"Of course!"

"And you worked throughout the period of both episodes involving Womin, without so much as raising your eyes-so you have attested."

"Then it must be so, since I am a stickler for accurate detail."

"I count nine flowers to this chain. They



are marigolds, not daisies. What do you say to that?"

Falael shifted his gaze here and there. "I was paying no great heed, Your Highness."

"Falael, the evidence suggests that you have been paltering with the truth, giving false testimony, performing mischievous pranks and attempting to deceive your king."

"It is surely a mistake, Your Highness!" said Falael, his expression brimming with limpid innocence.

King Throbius was not deceived. In a

grave voice, and despite Falael's reedy expostulations, he imposed a penalty of another seven years' itch. Falael dolefully went to sit on his post, and once more began to scratch his affected parts.

King Throbius called out: "Let the festival proceed, though now we must consider it a celebration of hope rather than accomplishment!"

Meanwhile Twisk had bidden Madouc and her company farewell. "It has been a pleasure to have seen you again! Perhaps some day at another time-"

"But good mother Twisk!" cried

Madouc. "Have you for gotten? I shall soon return to Thripsey Shee!"

"True," sighed Twisk, "presuming that you avoid the dangers of the forest."

"Are these then so terrible?"

"Sometimes the forest is sweet and clear," said Twisk. "Sometimes evil lurks behind every stump. Do not explore the morass which borders on Wamble Way; the long-necked heceptors will rise from the slime. In the gully nearby lives the troll Mangeon; avoid him as well. Do not fare west along Munkins Road; you would come to Castle Doldil, the seat of three-headed

Throop the ogre. He has caged many a brave knight and devoured many more, perhaps including gallant Sir Pellinore."

"And where shall we sleep by night?"

"Accept no hospitality! It will cost you dear! Take this kerchief." Twisk gave Madouc a square of pink and white silk.

"At sundown place it upon the turf and call out 'Aroisus!' It will become a pavilion for both safety and comfort. In the morning, call out: 'Deplectus!' and the pavilion will again become a kerchief. And now-"

"Wait! Where is the way to Idilra Post?"

"You must cross the meadow and pass under the tall ash tree. As you go, pay no heed to the festival! Taste no wine; eat no fairy-cake; tap not so much as your toe to fairy music! Beside the ash tree Wamble Way leads to the north; after twelve miles, you will come to the crossing with Munkins Road, and here stands Idilra Post, where I suffered my many trials."

Madouc spoke soothingly: "It was, on the whole, a lucky occasion, since, as a consequence, I am here to gladden your heart!"

Twisk could not restrain a smile. "At times you can be quite appealing, with

your sad blue eyes and strange little face! Good bye then, and take care!"

Madouc, Sir Pom-Pom and Travante crossed Madling Meadow to the ash tree and set out to the north along Wamble Way. When the sun sank low, Madouc placed the kerchief upon the turf of a little glade beside the way and called out: "Aroisus!" At once the kerchief became a pavilion furnished with three soft beds and a table loaded with good food and flasks of wine and bitter ale.

During the night peculiar sounds could be heard from the forest, and on several occasions there was the pad of heavy foot steps along Wamble Way. On each

occasion, the creature halted as it paused to inspect the pavilion, and then, after consideration, continued along the way and about its business.

Morning sunlight slanted through the forest to lay bright red spatters on the pink and white silk of the pavilion. Madouc, Sir Pom-Pom and Travante arose from their beds. Outside the pavilion dew glistened on the turf; the forest was silent save for an occasional bird-call.

The three breakfasted at the bountiful table, then prepared to depart. Madouc called out "Deplectus!" and the pavilion collapsed to a pink and white kerchief,

which Madouc tucked into her wallet.

The three set off up Warnble Way, with both Sir Pom-Pom and Travante keeping a careful lookout for the objects of their quest, as King Throbius had advised.

The lane skirted a tract of quaking black mud, intersected by rills of dark water. Tussocks of reed, burdock and saw grass beds broke the surface, as well as an occasional clump of stunted bitter willow or rotting alder. Bubbles rose up through the slime, and from one of the larger tussocks came a croaking voice, of unintelligible import. The three wayfarers only hastened their steps, and without untoward incident left the



morass behind.

Wamble Way veered to avoid a steep-sided hillock with a crag of black basalt at the summit. A path paved with black cobbles led into a shadowy gulch. Beside the path a sign, indited with characters of black and red, presented two quatrains of doggerel for the edification of passersby:

NOTICE!

Let travellers heed! This message  
confides

That Mangeon the Marvellous  
herein resides!

When Mangeon is wrathful his  
enemies quail;

But friends drink his health in  
beakers of ale.

His visage is handsome, his  
address is fine;

His touch causes damsels to sigh  
and repine.

They beg his caress; at his parting  
they weep,

And they murmur his name full oft  
as they sleep.

The three passed sign and cobblestone path without so much as a pause, and continued northward along Wamble Way. With the sun halfway up the sky they arrived at the crossing with Munkins Road. Beside the intersection stood a massive iron post: almost a foot in diameter and eight feet tall.

Madouc surveyed the post with disfavor. "Taken all with all, the situation is not to my liking. But it seems that I must carry out my part in the charade, misgivings or not."

"Why else are you here?" growled Sir Pom-Pom.

Madouc deigned no reply. "I will now work the glamour upon myself!" She tweaked her left ear with the fingers of her right hand, then looked toward her companions. "Has the spell taken effect?"

"Noticeably," said Travante. "You have become a maiden of fascinating appeal."

Sir Pom-Pom asked: "How can you bind yourself to the post when we lack both chain and rope?"

"We will do without the binding," said Madouc decisively. "Should there be a question, I will make an excuse."

Travante uttered a caution: "Keep your magic stone ready at hand, and take care not to drop it!"

"That is good advice," said Madouc.

"Go now and take yourselves well out of sight."

Sir Pom-Pom became difficult and wanted to hide nearby in the bushes, that he might see what went on, but Madouc would not listen. "Leave at once! Do not show yourselves until I call!

Furthermore, do not be peeking and peering, inasmuch as you might be seen!"

Sir Pom-Pom demanded in sour tones: "What will you be doing that requires

such privacy?"

"That is none of your affair!"

"I am not so sure of that, especially were I to earn the royal boon." Sir Pom-Pom showed a sly grin. "Even more especially since you control the glamour."

"The boon will not include me; rest easy on that score! Now go, or I will touch you with the pebble and send you off in a stupor!"

Sir Pom-Pom and Travante went off to the west along Mumkins Road and around a bend. They discovered a little

glade a few yards from the road and seated themselves on a log where they could not be seen by passersby.

Madouc stood alone at the crossroads. She looked in all directions and listened carefully. Nothing could be seen or heard. She went to Idilra Post and gingerly seated herself at its base.

Time went by: long minutes and hours. The sun reached its zenith, then slid past into the west. There were neither comings nor goings, save only for the furtive appearance of Sir Pom-Pom, who came peering around the bend in Munkins Road that he might discover what, if anything, had taken place.

Madouc sent him back the way he had come with a sharp rebuke.

Another hour passed. From the east came the faint sound of someone whistling. The tune was sprightly, yet somehow tentative as if the whistler were not completely confident or assured.

Madouc rose to her feet and waited. The whistling grew louder. Along Munkins Road came a young man, stocky and stalwart, with a broad placid face and a thatch of chestnut hair. His garments and soiled buckskins identified him as a peasant well acquainted with both pasture and barn.



Arriving in the crossroads he halted and surveyed Madouc with frank curiosity. At last he spoke: "Maiden, are you pent here against your will? I see no chain!"

"It is a magic chain, and I may not win free until three persons undertake my release, and this by an unconventional method."

"Indeed so? And what awful crime could have been committed by so lovely a creature?"

"I am guilty of three faults: frivolity, vanity and foolishness." The peasant spoke in puzzlement: "Why should they bring so stern a penalty?"

"That is the way of the world," said Madouc. "A certain proud person wished to become over-amiable, but I derided him and pointed out his lack of appeal. He ordained my humiliation, so here I wait upon the charitable attention of three strangers."

The young peasant came forward. "How many have assisted you to date?"

"You are the first to pass."

"As it happens, I am a man of compassion. Your plight has aroused my pity, and something else besides. If you will dispose yourself comfortably, we shall spend a merry interval, before I am

obliged to return home to my cows and their milking."

"Step a bit closer," said Madouc. "What is your name?"

"I am Nisby of Fobwiler Farm."

"Just so," said Madouc. "Come just a bit closer."

Nisby stepped bravely forward. Madouc touched the pebble to his chin. Nisby at once became rigid. "Follow me," said Madouc. She led him off the road and behind a copse of bay berry trees. On the turf she laid the pink and white kerchief.

"Aroisus!"

The kerchief became a pavilion. "Enter," said Madouc. "Sit down on the floor; make neither sound nor disturbance."

Madouc returned to Idilra Post and seated herself as before. The hours passed slowly, and once again Sir Pom-Pom could not restrain his curiosity; Madouc saw the shine of his face through a growth of mullein plants. Pretending not to notice, she hissed softly through her teeth and activated the Tinkle-toe Imp-spring. Up from the mullein leapt Sir Pom-Pom, to bound a full three feet into the air. Madouc called out: "What are you up to now, Sir Pom-

Pom, with your wild leaps? Did I not beg you to remain out of sight until I called?"

"I only wanted to make sure of your safety!" declared Sir Pom-Pom in a surly voice. "I did not intend to disturb you, no matter what you were up to; still, for some reason, I was forced to leap into the air."

"Please do not trouble yourself again," said Madouc. "Go back to where you left Travante."

Sir Pom-Pom departed with poor grace, and again Madouc disposed herself to wait.

Fifteen minutes passed. A jingling sound reached her ears. She rose to her feet and stood waiting. Down Wamble Way from the north came a creature running on eight splayed legs. Its head was like that of a great sea-horse, rearing high from a torso segmented of dark yellow plates. Astride the creature sat a faun with a crafty brown face, small horns, and lower limbs over grown with coarse brown fur. From his saddle and bridle hung a hundred small bells, which jingled to the gait of his bizarre steed.

The faun brought the creature to a halt and stared at Madouc. "Why do you sit so calmly by Idilra Post?"

"I am calm by nature."

"It is as good a reason as any. What do you think of my noble mount?"

"I have never seen such a creature before."

"Nor I, but it is docile enough. Will you ride at my back? I am bound for the isle in Kallimanthos Pond, where the wild grapes hang in purple tumbles."

"I must wait here."

"As you wish." The faun urged his steed into motion. He was soon out of sight, and his jingling gone from hearing.

The sun declined into the west. Madouc began to fret and wonder; she had no wish to sit by Idilra Post during the long hours of night.

From eastward along Munkins Road came the rumpety-tump rumpety-tump of galloping hooves. Just short of the crossroads the sound diminished as the horse slowed to a walk. A moment later a knight in half-armour, mounted on a fine bay horse, rode into view.

The knight drew up his horse. For a moment he studied Madouc, then dismounted and tied the horse to a tree. He lifted the



helmet from his head and hung it to the saddle. Madouc saw a gentleman somewhat past his first youth, with lank yellow hair

hanging beside a long mournful face. Heavy-lidded eyes droopedr at the corners; long yellow mustaches dangled to either side of his mouth, creating an impression of amiable impracticality. He turned to face Madouc and performed a courtly bow.

"Allow me to present myself. I am Sir Jaucinet of Castle Cloud, and a knight of full chivalry. May I inquire your name, your condition and why I find you in such dismal straits, standing as if in need

of succor beside Idilra Post?"

"You may ask, certainly," said Madouc. "I would gladly answer in full were it not that dusk is coming on, and the sooner I am finished with my deplorable duty the better."

"Well spoken!" declared Sir Jaucinet. "I take it that I can be of assistance?"

"True. Be kind enough to approach. No; you need not remove your armour as of this particular instant."

"Are you sure?" asked Sir Jaucinet doubtfully.

"Quite sure, if you will only come a few steps closer."

"With pleasure! You are a most beautiful maiden; let me kiss you!"

"Sir Jaucinet, under different conditions I would consider you extremely forward, or even brisk. But still ...

Sir Jaucinet stepped close and in due course joined Nisby inside the pavilion. Madouc resumed her vigil. The sun sank low, and once again Sir Pom-Pom showed himself, now brazenly in the middle of the road. He called: "How long must we dawdle here? Darkness approaches; I do not want to mingle with

creatures of the night."

"Come then," said Madouc. "Bring Travante; the two of you may sit in the pavilion."

Sir Pom-Pom and Travante hastened to follow the suggestion, and now it was discovered that the pavilion had added to itself another chamber, where Nisby and Sir Jaucinet sat in conditions of apathy.

The sun disappeared behind the trees. Madouc stretched her cramped muscles, walked three paces in all directions, looked up each road, but vision blurred in the gathering dusk and she discovered

nothing. Madouc went back to the post, and stood with uneasiness tweaking at her nerves. Twilight shrouded the Forest of Tantrevalles. For a period Madouc watched the bats wheeling and darting overhead. As twilight waned and the sky went dark, then brightened in the east as the moon rose into the sky.

Madouc shivered to a waft of cool air. She wondered if she truly wanted to stand by Idilra Post in the wan moonlight. Probably not. She brooded over the reasons why she had come, and she thought of Nisby and Sir Jaucinet secure in the pavilion: two of the three. Madouc sighed and looked apprehensively in every direction. All

color was gone, blanched by the moonlight. The roads were silver-gray; shadows were black.

The moon rose up the sky. An owl drifted across the forest and was briefly silhouetted upon the face of the moon. Madouc saw a shooting star. From far off in the forest came an odd hooting sound.

The moving shadow Madouc had been expecting came along the road, advancing step by slow step. Fifteen feet from the post it halted. A black cloak muffled the body; a broad-brimmed hat shaded the face. Madouc shrank back against the post, tense and quiet. The

shadowed figure stood motionless. Madouc drew a slow breath. She peered, trying to discern a face under the hat but saw nothing. The area was blank, as if she were looking into a void.

Madouc spoke, her voice tremulous: "Who are you, dark of shadow?"

The shape made no response.

Madouc tried again: "Are you dumb? Why will you not speak?"

The shadow whispered: "I have come to succor you from the post. Long ago I did the same for the willful fairy Twisk, to her great content. You shall be allowed

the same comfort. Remove your garments, that I may see your form in the moonlight."

Madouc gripped the stone so tightly that she feared she might drop it, which would never do. She quavered: "It is considered genteel for the gentleman to divest himself first."

"That is not important," whispered the dark shape. "It is time to proceed."

The creature sidled forward and reached to remove Madouc's gown. She thrust with the pebble into the blank countenance, but met only emptiness. In a panic she pressed the pebble at the



groping hands, but the sleeves of the cloak thwarted her effort.

The shadow brushed her arm aside and bore her to the ground; the pebble jarred loose and went rolling. Madouc gave a sad little cry, and for an instant lay limp; it was almost her ruin. But now, with a spasmodic effort, she squirmed free and groped for the pebble. The shadow seized her leg. "Why this mettlesome agility? Calm yourself and lie quiet! Otherwise the process becomes exhausting."

"One moment," gasped Madouc. "The process already goes too fast."

"That to the side, let us continue."

Madouc's fingers closed on the pebble. She thrust it against the black form and touched the creature in one of its parts. At once it went lax.

Madouc rose gratefully to her feet. She settled her gown and ran her fingers through her hair, then looked down at the listless shadow. "Rise; follow me!"

She took the shambling figure to the side chamber of the pavilion where Nisby and Sir Jaucinet sat staring into vacancy. "Enter; sit; do not move until I give the command."

Madouc stood in the moonlight for a moment, looking out upon the crossroads. She told herself: "I have succeeded, but now I am almost afraid to learn the truth. Sir Jaucinet seems the most noble, while the shadow is the most mysterious. There is little to be said for Nisby except his rustic simplicity."

She thought of the glamour. "It seems to make me more conspicuous than I like; for the nonce, I shall have done with it."

With the fingers of her left hand she tweaked the lobe of her right ear. "Is it gone?" she wondered. "I feel no change in myself." When she entered the pavilion, the demeanor of both Sir Pom-

Pom and Travante assured her that the glamour had gone, which brought her a hurtful, if illogical, little twinge of something like regret.

## V

In the morning Madouc, Sir Pom-Pom and Travante breakfasted within the pavilion. It was thought best that neither Nisby nor Sir Jaucinet be aroused to take nourishment for which they might or might not feel appetite. The same considerations applied even more persuasively to the shadowy figure in the black cloak, who by day was as bizarre incomprehensible as by night. Under the

wide brim of his hat opened a void into which no one cared to look too closely.

After breakfast Madouc marshalled Nisby, Sir Jaucinet and the nameless shadow-thing out into the road. Sir Jaucinet's horse had broken loose during the night and was nowhere to be seen.

Madouc reduced the pavilion to a kerchief; the party set off to the south down Wamble Way, Sir Pom-Pom and Travante taking the lead, Madouc coming after, followed by Nisby, then Sir Jaucinet, and finally the individual in the black cloak.

Shortly before noon, the group once

again entered Madling Meadow, which, as before, seemed only a grassy expanse with a hummock at the center. Madouc called softly: "Twisk! Twisk! Twisk!"

Mists and vapors confused their eyes, dissipating to reveal the fairy castle, with banners at every turret. The festival decorations celebrating Falael's rehabilitation were no longer in evidence; as for Falael, he had abandoned his post for the moment and sat under a birch tree to the edge of the meadow, using a twig to reach inaccessible areas of his back.

Twisk appeared beside Madouc, today wearing pale blue pantaloons riding low

on her hips and a shirt of white diaphane. "You have wasted no time," said Twisk. She inspected Madouc's captives. "How the sight of those three takes me back in memory! But there are changes! Nisby has become a man; Sir Jaucinet seems dedicated to wistful yearning."

Madouc said: "It is the effect of his plaintive eyes and the long droop of his mustaches."

Twisk averted her eyes from the third member of the group. "As for yonder odd creature, King Throbious shall judge. Come; we must interrupt his contemplations, but that is the way of it."

The group trooped across the meadow to a place at the front of the castle. Fairies of the shee came from all directions, bounding, flitting, turning cartwheels and somersaults, to crowd close and babble questions; to pry, pinch and poke. From his place under the birch tree Falael came at a hop and a run, to mount his post the more readily to observe events.

At the main portal to the castle a pair of young heralds stood proudly on duty. They were splendid in livery of black and yellow diaper and carried clarions turned from fairy silver. At Twisk's behest they turned toward the castle and blew three brilliant fanfares of



coruscating harmonies.

The heralds lowered their horns and wiped their mouths with the back of their hands, grinning all the while at Twisk.

A silence of expectation held the area, broken only by the giggles of three implets who were trying to tie small green frogs into Sir Jaucinet's mustaches. Twisk chided the implets and sent them away. Madouc went to remove the frogs but was interrupted by the appearance of King Throbius on a balcony, fifty feet above the meadow. In a stern voice he called the heralds:

"What means this wanton summons? I

was engrossed in meditation!"

One of the heralds called up to the balcony: "It was Twisk! She ordered us to disturb your rest."

The other herald corroborated the statement. "She told us to blow a great blast that would startle you from your bed to the floor."

Twisk gave an indifferent shrug. "Blame me, if you like; however, I acted on the insistence of Madouc, whom you may remember."

Madouc, with an injured glance toward Twisk, stepped forward. "I am here!"

"So I see! What of that?"

"Do you not remember? I went to Idilra Post that I might learn the identity of my father!" She indicated the three individuals at her back. "Here is Nisby the peasant, Sir Jaucinet the knight; also this mysterious shape of no category, nor yet any face."

"I remember the case distinctly!" said King Throbius. He looked across the area with disapproval. "Fairies! Why do you thrust and crush and press with such rude energy? One and all, stand back! Now then: Twisk! You must make a sure and careful inspection."

"One glance was enough," said Twisk.

"And your findings?"

"I recognize Nisby and Sir Jaucinet. As for the shadow, his face is invisible, which in itself is a significant index."

"It is indeed unique. The case has aspects of interest."

King Throbius stepped back from the balcony and a moment later came out upon the meadow. Again the fairies crowded about, to chortle and murmur, to mow and leer, until King Throbius issued orders so furious that his subjects shrank back abashed.

"Now then!" said King Throbius. "We will proceed. Madouc, for you this must be a happy occasion! Soon you will be able to claim one of these three for your beloved father."

Madouc dubiously considered the possibilities. "Sir Jaucinet undoubtedly boasts the best pedigree; still I cannot believe that I am related to someone who looks like a sick sheep."

"All will be made known," said King Throbius confidently. He looked to right and left. "Osfer! Where are you?"

"I have expected your call, Your Highness! I stand directly behind your

royal back."

"Come forward, Osfer, into the purview of my eyes. We must exercise your craft. Madouc's paternity is in question and we must definitely resolve the issue."

Osfer stepped forward: a fairy of middle maturity, brown of skin and gnarled of limb, with eyes of amber and a nose which hooked almost to meet an up-jutting chin. "Sire, your orders?"

"Go to your workshop; return with dishes of Matronian nephrite, to the number of five; bring probers, nitsnips, and a gill of your Number Six Elixir."

"Your Highness, I presumed to anticipate your commands, and I already have these items at hand."

"Very good, Osfer. Order your varlets to bring hither a table; let it be spread with a cloth of gray murvaille."

"The order has been effected, Sire. The table stands ready at he your left hand."

King Throbius turned to inspect the arrangements. "Well done, Osfer. Now then: bring out your best extractor; we shall need fibrils of coming and going. When all is ready, we will contrive our matrices."

"In minutes only, Your Highness! I move with the speed of flashing nymodes when urgency is the call!"

"Do so now! Madouc is hard-put to restrain her eagerness; it is as if she were dancing upon thorns."

"A pathetic case, to be sure," said Osfer. "But soon indeed she will be able to embrace her father."

In a subdued voice Madouc spoke to King Throbius: "Enlighten me, Your Highness! How will you prove the case?"

"Be attentive; all will be made known.



Twisk, why are you so exercised?"

"Osfer is molesting me!"

"Not so, Your Highness! You were about to order matrices; I had already started to apply the drain to Twisk."

"Of course. Twisk, we must have three minims of your blood; be stoic."

"I am loth to endure these martyrdoms! Is it truly needful?"

King Throbius made a meaningful sign; hissing between her teeth Twisk gingerly allowed Osfer to ply his instruments. He took a quantity of blood from her

slender wrist, which he then discharged into one of the nephrite dishes. By processes too swift for Madouc to follow, he used the blood to nurture a fragile construction of fibers and small blue, red and green plasms.

Osfer turned proudly to King Throbius. "It is perfection in all respects! Each quirk and phase of Twisk's somewhat devious nature are open for inspection."

"You have done well." King Throbius turned to Madouc. "Now it is your turn; from your blood Osfer will grow a matrix that is yours alone."

Madouc cried out between clenched

teeth. "My turn has come and gone! He has already done his worst to me!"

Presently a matrix somewhat similar to that derived from Twisk appeared on a second plate.

"Next, let us try Sir Jaucinet!" said King Throbius. "Soon we shall see who is father to whom!"

Osfer drew blood from Sir Jaucinet's nerveless arm and constructed the matrix peculiar to the lord of Castle Cloud.

King Throbius turned to Madouc. "There you see three matrices, representing the innate fabric of yourself, your mother,

Twisk, and this noble knight. By the most subtle means, Osfer will now subtract the influence of Twisk from your matrix, to create a new matrix. If your father is Sir Jaucinet, the new matrix will be identical to his, and you will know the truth of your paternity. Osfer, you may proceed."

"Sire, I have completed the operation. Behold the two matrices!"

"I assume they are identical?" said King Throbius.

"Not at all, and in no particular!"

"Aha!" said King Throbius. "So much

for Sir Jaucinet; he may be excused. Liberate him from your thrall, Madouc; bid him be on his way."

Madouc obeyed the instruction. Sir Jaucinet gave instant vent to peevish complaints, and demanded reasons for the many inconveniences to which he had been put.

"I can give you no easy response," said Madouc. "It is a long and detailed story."

"What of the frogs in my mustache?" demanded Sir Jaucinet. "Is their presence such a complicated affair?"

"Not altogether," Madouc admitted.  
"Still, King Throbius has ordered your departure, and you had best hurry, since the afternoon is waning and the way is long."

Sir Jaucinet, his expression one of deep chagrin, turned on his heel. "Wait!" called King Throbius. "Osfer, apply the 'Four-fold Spell' to speed good Sir Jaucinet on his journey."

"Indeed, Sire, while he conferred with Madouc, I applied the 'Six-fold Spell'," said Osfer.

"Good work, Osfer!" King Throbius spoke to Sir Jaucinet:

"As you march home, each of your strides will carry you six yards, and you will arrive at Castle Cloud well before you expected."

Sir Jaucinet bowed stiffly; first to King Throbious and then to Osfer. For Madouc he spared only a glance of moist-eyed reproach; then he was gone, bounding across Madling Meadow on six-fold strides, and was soon lost to sight.

King Throbious turned to Osfer. "Now then: let us deal with the peasant Nisby."

"Sire, you will note on this dish the matrix of Nisby, which I have already taken the liberty of constructing."

Madouc went to look. To her dismay, Nisby's matrix resembled her not at all, and everyone agreed that her paternity surely resided elsewhere than with Nisby. Glumly Madouc liberated him from his nerveless apathy; Osfer applied the 'Six-fold Spell' and Nisby was sent on his way.

King Throbius addressed Madouc in a somber voice: "My dear, I have taken your interest to heart, and I cannot say that I am pleased with our findings. You have been sired neither by Sir Jaucinet nor by Nisby; hence, we are left with this shadowy weirdling with vacancy for a face. The Third Statute of Logic, sometimes known as the 'Law of



Exclusion', forces me to declare him your father. You may liberate him and hold your reunion at whatever time and place suits your best convenience; no doubt you will have much to tell each other."

Madouc cried out in a troubled voice: "Your logic is naturally superb, but should we not also test this creature's matrix?"

King Throbius spoke to Osfer: "What is your opinion?"

"I suggest a third matrix, if only to create a philosophical symmetry."

King Throbius said: "I am not opposed, though the test will be redundant. However, you may approach Madouc's father, draw three minims of blood and erect a matrix for all to see."

Osfer gingerly approached the black-cloaked figure, then halted in bafflement.

King Throbius called out: "Why do you delay? We are anxious to demonstrate Madouc's paternity!"

"I am in a quandary," said Osfer. "He wears cloak, boots and gloves; he lacks neck, face and scalp. In order to draw his blood, I must remove the cloak, and expose his person. Shall I proceed?"

"Proceed, by all means!" commanded King Throbius.

"Ordinarily we would respect his modesty, but delicacy must be put aside, along with the cloak. Madouc, you may avert your eyes if you wish."

"I will see what needs to be seen," said Madouc. She ignored Sir Pom-Pom's disparaging snort. "Continue with the work."

Osfer, with little fingers extended, in the manner of a fastidious tailor, unclasped the buckle at the neck of the cloak, which then fell somewhat apart. Osfer looked into the gap and gave a startled

exclamation. With a single sweep he drew the cloak aside, to reveal a squat gray-faced troll with a bottle nose, pendulous cheeks and eyes like small balls of black glass. His arms were long and knotted; his splayed legs were thrust into tall boots. Osfer cried out: "It is Mangeon the troll!"

Twisk gave a thin wailing shriek of distress. "Now I understand all! With what ignoble cunning he took his lewd revenge!"

Madouc quavered: "Despite all logic, can this truly be my father?"

"We shall see!" said King Throbius.

"Osfer, build the matrix!"

"Sire, I have preceded your command! The matrix is already formed! You may examine it as you see fit, and compare it with that provided by Madouc."

King Throbius peered down at the two matrices. He spoke in perplexity. "How can it be? Does madness rule the world? Does the sun rise in the west? Is water wet and fire hot, or is it all in reverse? Logic has played us all false! This matrix is more at discord than both of the others together! I am baffled!"

Madouc could not restrain a yelp of happy relief. "Sir Jaucinet is not my

father. Nisby is not my father. This repulsive halfling is not my father. Who then is my father?"

King Throbius examined Twisk with a speculative eye. "Can you clarify this puzzle?"

The dispirited Twisk could only shake her head. "The time is long past. I cannot remember every trifle."

"Still, one of these trifles produced Madouc."

"So much is conceded," said Twisk, "but memories blend; faces merge. When I shut my eyes, I hear whispers-

beguilements, adoration, sighs of love requited-but I find no name for these voices."

King Throbius noticed Madouc's disconsolate face. He said: "Do not despair! There remains yet another arrow in the quiver! But first I must deal with this odious troll."

Twisk spoke with fervor. "He deserves no mercy; he caused me great unease."

King Throbius pulled at his beard. "It is a complex situation, since I cannot decide which of our laws he has violated. His trickery was instigated in part by Twisk herself, but his response

seems inordinately rude. Flirts through the ages have notoriously enjoyed immunity." King Throbius paced back and forth, and the implets who carried his train were hard-put to carry out their duties. Osfer meanwhile took Mangeon somewhat aside, along with several of his thaumaturgical instruments.

King Throbius came to a halt. He raised his hand in a majestic gesture. "I have arrived at a judgment. Mangeon's conduct has been sordid and disreputable. Further, he has affronted the dignity of Thripsey Shee. The penalty must be consonant with the offense; still we must take note of contributory circumstances. We will therefore allow



Mangeon tranquillity and scope for remorse; we will urge him, whether he is so inclined or not, along the narrow path of restraint. Osfer, do you understand the nature of my indication, or must I spell it out in full detail?"

"Sire, I have understood you fully, and indeed I have already implemented your sentence, in full and final scope."

"Osfer, you are a marvel of efficiency!" King Throbious turned to Madouc. "You may now release Mangeon from his paralysis"

Madouc touched Mangeon with the pebble. Instantly he gave vent to furious

roaring complaint. "I deplore the outrages committed upon my person! They represent an irresponsible philosophy!"

King Throbius spoke with dignity: "You are free to depart; be happy on this account!"

"I am free, but to what purpose?" roared Mangeon. "How now will I occupy the long hours of day and night? With poetry? By observing the flight of butterflies? Your judgment was incorrect!"

King Throbius made a peremptory gesture. "I will hear no more! Be off to

your ill-smelling hovel."

Mangeon threw his arms into the air and ran off across the meadow, to disappear up Wamble Way.

King Throbius returned to Madouc. "We must re-examine your case. Osfer, I suggest simulacra and the subtractive effect."

"Exactly my opinion, Your Highness! I have prepared for the process."

"Proceed, if you will."

Osfer placed three silver plates upon the table. Twisk watched with a frown of

foreboding. "What is this new plan, and what does it entail?"

Osfer replied in soothing tones. "It is the most elegant and subtle procedure of all! Soon you will look into the face of Madouc's father."

Twisk frowned in annoyance. "Why did you not work this sleight before and spare me the anguish of the bloodletting?"

"It is not so simple as we might like it to be. Step forward, if you will."

"What? Not again! You shall have no more of my vital fluids! Do you wish me

to become a wisp, a wraith, a desiccation?"

King Throbius called a sharp command and Twisk, writhing and moaning, at last allowed Osfer to draw off another three minims of her blood.

Osfer worked his thaumaturgy and up from the plate rose a simulacrum of Twisk's lovely head.

Next, Osfer signalled to Madouc.  
"Come!"

Madouc cried out: "I too am dangerously weak! If blood is needed, drain Sir Pom-Pom, or even King Throbius himself."

"This is an impractical suggestion," said King Throbius. "It is your blood which is needed! Quickly! We cannot waste all day!"

Madouc, scowling and wincing, allowed Osfer to draw three minims of her blood, from which Osfer contrived a second simulacrum.

"Now then!" said Osfer. "We proceed as follows: Madouc is the sum of Twisk and an unknown father. Therefore, if we subtract the influence of Twisk from Madouc, what remains will depict the visage of Madouc's father, at least in general terms and perhaps blurred by discrepancies. So, stand back all, since I

must work with a delicate touch!"

Osfer moved the two representations so that they faced each other, then arranged four panels of grass cloth to form a screen around the two heads. "I now adjure all to silence! Any distraction will alter the precision of my work!"

Osfer arranged his instruments, uttered eight staccato syllables, and clapped his hands. "The spell has been effected."

Osfer removed the screens. One of the silver plates was empty. "Twisk's image has been subtracted from that of Madouc. What remains is the likeness of Madouc's sire!"

Madouc stared at the residual face. With only half the substance, it was vague and colorless, as if formed of mist.

The features seemed to represent a young man with irregular features in a rather gaunt long-jawed face and a suggestion of reckless optimism in his expression. His hair was cut in the Aquitanian style, and he wore a short modish beard at the chin. The face, though not ill-favored, lacked a patrician cast. Even in its blurred condition, the face affected Madouc with a rush of warm impulses.

Twisk was staring at the face in fascination. Madouc asked: "What is his name?"



Twisk, now thoroughly out of sorts, made a capricious gesture and tossed her head. "His name? It might be anyone. The features are indefinite; it is like looking through the fog."

"Surely you recognize him?" cried Madouc. "He even looks half-familiar to me."

Twisk gave an airy shrug. "Why should he not? You are seeing what is drawn from your own face."

"Whatever the case, can you supply his name?"

Twisk said carelessly: "I am truly bored

with this business! I can barely distinguish a face in yonder puddle of murk; how can I give it a name?"

"But is he not familiar to you?"

"I might say 'Yes' and I might say 'No'."

King Throbius spoke gently: "As Falael will attest, my patience knows a limit. Unless you care to sit on a post, scratching your lovely pelt with both hands, you will respond to questions quickly and accurately, without evasion or ambiguity. Am I clear on this?"

Twisk uttered a cry of poignant emotion. "Alas! How I am wronged, when my

only concern is truth!"

"Please make your elucidations less abstract."

Twisk blinked. "Excuse me, Your Highness, I am not certain of your command!"

"Speak more clearly!"

"Very well, but now I have forgotten the question."

King Throbius spoke with a carefully controlled voice. "Do you recognize the face?"

"Of course! How could I forget? He was

a gallant knight of verve and a most fanciful habit of thought! My ordeal at Idilra Post followed hard upon the encounter and swept it clean from my mind."

"Very well; so much is established. Name us now the name of this gallant knight."

"Quite possible! Sir Pellinore played the lute with delicate grace, and his songs were so sweet as to bring tears from a bear."

Madouc struggled to control her emotion. "Why did you not try to rescue

poor Sir Pellinore, whom you loved so well?"

Twisk fluffed out her lavender hair. "My attention was engaged by other events, not the least being the affair at Idilra

Post. One such as I lives from instant to instant, wringing every last drop of sklemik<sup>13</sup> from the adventure of life. So the hours and the days pass, and sometimes I cannot remember which was which or what comes next."

Madouc said without enthusiasm: "Regardless of your faults or follies, you are my mother, and I must accept you as you are, lavender hair and all."

"A dutiful daughter is not so bad either," said Twisk. "I am pleased to hear your compliments."

# CHAPTER NINE

## I

King Throbius grew weary and decided to sit. With a gesture he brought a throne from the castle and caused it to be placed directly at his back. The implets who carried his train scurried frantically lest the throne pin the royal cloak to the turf, with consequences painful to themselves.

King Throbius settled himself upon the throne: a construction of ebony riveted with rosettes of black iron and pearl, surmounted by a fan of ostrich plumes.

For a moment King Throbius sat upright, while the implets, working at speed, though with quarrelling and bickering, arranged his train to its best display. He then leaned back to take his comfort.

Queen Bossum sauntered past on her way to the castle, where she would change to a costume suitable for the activities she had planned for the afternoon. She paused beside the throne and proffered a suggestion which King Throbius found persuasive. Queen Bossum continued to the castle and King Throbius summoned three of his officials: Triollet, the Lord High Steward; Mipps, Chief Victualler to the Royal Board; and Chaskervil, Keeper of



the Bins.

The three responded with alacrity and listened in respectful silence while King Throbious issued his instructions. "Today is auspicious," said King Throbious in his roundest tones. "We have discomfited the troll Mangeon, and minimized his predilection for certain wicked tricks. Mangeon will think twice before attempting new affronts!"

"It is a proud day!" declared Mipps.

"It is a day of triumph!" cried Triollet fervently.

"I concur with both my colleagues, in

every respect!" stated Chaskervil.

"Just so," said King Throbius. "We shall signal the occasion with a small but superb banquet of twenty courses, to be served upon the castle terrace, thirty guests and five hundred flicker-lamps. Address yourselves to the perfection of this event!"

"It shall be done!" cried Triollet.

The three officials hurried off to implement the royal command. King Throbius relaxed into his throne. He surveyed the meadow, that he might observe his subjects and appraise their conduct. He took note of Madouc, where

she stood by Osfer's table, sadly watching Sir Pellinore's face dissolve into mist.

"Hm," said King Throbius to himself. He stepped down from his throne and with a stately tread approached the table.

"Madouc, I notice that your face shows little joy, even though your most ardent hope has been realized! You have learned the identity of your father, and your curiosity is gratified; am I not correct?"

Madouc gave her head a wistful shake. "I must now discover whether he is alive or dead and, if alive, where he abides. My quest has become more difficult than

ever!"

"Nevertheless, you should be clapping your pretty hands for joy! We have demonstrated that the troll Mangeon is not included among your forbears. This, by itself, should induce an almost delirious euphoria."

Madouc managed the quiver of a smile. "In this regard, Your Highness, I am happy beyond words!"

"Good!" King Throbious pulled at his beard and glanced around the meadow, to discover the whereabouts of Queen Bossum. At the moment she was nowhere in sight. King Throbious spoke

in a somewhat lighter voice than before: "Tonight we shall celebrate Mangeon's defeat! There will be a banquet both elegant and exclusive; only persons of special *éclat* will be present, all in full regalia. We will dine on the terrace under five hundred ghost-lanterns; the viands will be exquisite, equally so the wines! The feast will proceed until midnight, to be followed by a pavane under the moon, to melodies of the utmost sweetness."

"It sounds very fine," said Madouc.

"That is our intent. Now then: since you are visiting the shee in a special capacity, and have achieved a certain

reputation, you will be allowed to attend the banquet." King Throbius stood back, smiling and toying with his beard. "You have heard the invitation; will you elect to be present?"

Madouc looked uneasily off across the meadow, uncertain how best to reply. She felt the king's gaze on her face; darting a side glance she discovered an expression which surprised her. It was like that she had once glimpsed in the red-brown eyes of a fox. Madouc blinked; when she looked back, King Throbius was as bland and stately as ever.

Once again King Throbius asked: "How

say you? Will you attend the banquet? The queen's own seamstress shall provide your gown-perhaps a delicious trifle woven of dandelion fluff, or a flutter of spider-silk stained with pomegranate."

Madouc shook her head. "I thank Your Highness, but I am not ready for such a splendid affair. Your guests would be strange to me, with customs beyond my knowledge, and I might unwittingly give offense or make myself foolish."

"Fairies are as tolerant as they are sympathetic," said King Throbius.

"They are also known for their surprises.

I fear all fairy revelry; in the morning—who knows? I might find myself a withered crone forty years old! Many thanks, Your Highness! But I must decline the invitation."

King Throbius, smiling his easy smile, made a sign of equanimity. "You must act to your best desires. The day verges into afternoon. Yonder stands Twisk; go and say your goodbyes; then you may take your leave of Thripsey Shee."

"One question, Sire, as to the magical adjuncts you have allowed me."

"They are transient. The pebble already has lost its force. The glamour lingers



more lovingly, but tomorrow you may pull all you like at your ear, to no avail. Go now and consult your fractious mother."

Madouc approached Twisk, who pretended an interest in the sheen of her silver fingernails. "Mother! I will soon be leaving Thripsey Shee."

"A wise decision. I bid you farewell."

"First, dear Mother, you must tell me more of Sir Pellinore."

"As you like," said Twisk without enthusiasm. "The sun is warm; let us sit in the shade of the beech tree."

The two settled themselves cross-legged in the grass. Fairies one by one came to sit around them, that they might hear all that transpired and share in any new sensation. Sir Pom-Pom also came slouching across the meadow, to stand leaning against the beech tree, where presently he was joined by Travante.

Twisk sat pensively chewing on a blade of grass. "There is little to tell, beyond what you already know. Still, this is what happened."

Twisk told the tale in a musing voice, as if she were remembering the events of a bittersweet dream. She admitted that she had been taunting Mangeon, mocking his

hideous face and denouncing his crimes, which included a sly tactic of creeping up behind some careless fairy maiden, trapping her in a net and carrying her off to his dismal manse, where she must serve his evil purposes until she became bedraggled and he tired of her.

One day while Twisk wandered in the forest Mangeon crept up behind her and flung his net, but Twisk skipped clear and fled, pursued at a humping jumping run by Mangeon.

Twisk eluded him without difficulty, hiding behind a tree while Mangeon blundered past. Twisk laughed to herself and started back to Madling Meadow.

Along the way she passed through a pretty glade, where she came upon Sir Pellinore sitting by a still pool, watching dragonflies darting back and forth across the water, meanwhile plucking idle chords from his lute. Sir Pellinore carried only a shortsword and no shield, but on a branch he had hung a black cloak embroidered with what Twisk took to be his arms: three red roses on a blue field.

Twisk was favorably impressed by Sir Pellinore's appearance and stepped demurely forward. Sir Pellinore jumped to his feet and welcomed her with a nice blend of courtesy and candid admiration, which pleased her to such an extent that

she joined him by the pool, where they sat side by side on a fallen log. Twisk asked his name and why he ventured so deeply into the Forest of Tantrevalles.

After an instant of hesitation he said:  
"You may know me as Sir Pellinore, a wandering knight of Aquitaine, in search of romantic adventure."

"You are far from your native land," said Twisk.

"For a vagabond, 'here' is as good as 'there'," said Sir Pellinore.

"Furthermore-who knows?-I may well find my fortune in this secret old forest. I have already discovered the most

beautiful creature ever to torment my imagination!"

Twisk smiled and looked at him through half-lowered lashes. "Your remarks are reassuring, but they come so easily that I wonder at their conviction. Can they really be sincere?"

"Were I made of stone I would still be convinced! Though my voice might be somewhat less melodious."

Twisk laughed quietly and allowed her shoulder to brush that of Sir Pellinore. "In regard to fortune, the ogre Gois has robbed, pillaged and preempted thirty tons of gold, which in his vanity he used

to create a monumental statue of himself. The ogre Carabara owns a crow which speaks ten languages, foretells the weather and gambles with dice, winning large sums from every one it encounters. The ogre Throop is master of a dozen treasures, including a tapestry which each day shows a different scene, a fire which burns without fuel and a bed of air upon which he rests in comfort. According to rumour, he took a chalice sacred to the Christians from a fugitive monk, and many brave knights, from all over Christendom, have attempted to wrest this article from Throop."

"And how have they fared?"

"Not well. Some challenge Throop to combat; usually they are killed by a pair of goblin knights. Others who bring gifts are allowed into Castle Doldil, but to what effect? All end up either in Throop's great black soup kettle or in a cage, where they must amuse Throop and all three of his heads as they dine. Seek your fortune elsewhere; that is my advice."

"I suspect that I have found the most marvellous fortune the world provides here in this very glade," said Sir Pellinore.

"That is a graceful sentiment."



Sir Pellinore clasped Twisk's slender hand. "I would willingly enhance the occasion, were I not in awe of your fairy beauty, and also of your fairy magic."

"Your fears are absurd," said Twisk.

So for a time the two dallied in the glade, at last becoming languid. Twisk tickled Sir Pellinore's ear with a blade of grass. "And when you leave this glade, where will you go?"

"Perhaps north, perhaps south. Perhaps I will visit Throop in his den and avenge his murders, and also divest him of his wealth."

Twisk cried out in sadness You are both brave and gallant but you would only share the fate of all the others!"

"Is there no way to baffle this evil creature?"

"You may gain time by a ruse, but in the end he will trick you."

"What is the ruse?"

"Appear before the Castle Doldil with a gift. He then must offer you hospitality and return a host-gift of the same value. He will offer food and drink but you must take only what he gives and no more by so much as a crumb or then,

with a great roar he will accuse you of theft and that will be your doom. Heed my advice, Sir Pellinore! Look elsewhere for both vengeance and fortune!"

"You are persuasive!" Sir Pellinore bent to kiss the beautiful face so close to his own, but Twisk, looking over his shoulder, saw the distorted visage of Mangeon the troll glaring through the foliage. She gave a startled cry, and told Sir Pellinore what she had seen, but when he jumped to his feet, sword in hand, Mangeon had disappeared.

Twisk and Sir Pellinore at last parted. Twisk returned to Thripsey Shee; as for

Sir Pellinore, she could only hope that he had not taken himself to Castle Doldil, in accordance with his stated inclination. "That," said Twisk, "is all I know of Sir Pellinore."

"But where should I look to find him now?"

Twisk gave one of her airy shrugs. "Who knows? Perhaps he set off to vanquish Throop; perhaps not. Only Throop will know the truth."

"Would Throop remember after so long?"

"The shields of all his victim knights

bedizen the walls of his hall; for recollection, Throop need only look along the ranked escutcheons. But he would tell you nothing unless you told him something of equal consequence in return."

Madouc frowned. "Might not he simply seize me and drop me into his soup kettle?"

"Indeed! If you made free with his property." Twisk rose to her feet. "My best advice is this: avoid Castle Doldil. Throop's three heads are equally merciless."

"Still, I am anxious to learn the fate of

Sir Pellinore."

"Alas!" sighed Twisk. "I can advise you no better! If through obstinate folly you risk the venture, remember what I told Sir Pellinore. First you must win past a pair of goblin knights mounted on gryphons."

"How shall I do this?"

Twisk spoke in irritation. "Have I not taught you the Tinkle-toe? Apply it at triple-force. After you have thwarted the goblins and their nightmare steeds, you may request admission to Castle Doldil. Throop will admit you with pleasure. Greet each of the three heads in turn, as

they are jealous of their status. On the left is Pism, in the center is Pasm, to the right is Posm. You must mention that you come as a guest and that you bring a host-gift. Thereafter, take only what is freely given and not an iota more. If you obey this rule, Throop is powerless to do you harm, by reason of a spell long ago imposed upon him. If he offers you a grape, do not take the stem. If he allows you a dish of cold porridge, and you discover a weevil in the meal, put it carefully aside or inquire as to its best disposition. Take no gift for which you cannot make a proper return. If you give your host-gift first, he must respond with a gift of equal value. Above all, attempt no theft from Throop, for his eyes see

everywhere."

Sir Pom-Pom spoke: "Does Throop for a fact hold the Holy Grail in custody?"

"Possibly. Many have lost their lives in the quest! So it maybe."

Travante put a question. "What host-gifts should we bring to Throop, to hold his rage in check?"

Twisk spoke in surprise. "You too intend to risk your life?"

"Why not? Is it unthinkable that Throop keeps my lost youth locked away in his great chest, along with his other



valuables?"

"It is not unthinkable, but not probable either," said Twisk.

"No matter; I will search where I can: the most likely places first."

Twisk asked, half-mocking: "And what, of equal value, will you offer Throop in return?"

Travante considered. "What I seek is beyond value. I must ponder carefully."

Sir Pom-Pom asked: "What can I offer Throop that he might part with the Holy Grail?"

The fairies who had come to listen had lost interest and one by one had wandered away, until only three implets remained. After whispering together, they had become convulsed with mirth. Twisk turned to chide them. "Why, suddenly, are you so merry?"

One of the implets ran forward and, half-giggling, half-whispering, spoke into her ear, and Twisk herself began to smile. She looked across the meadow; King Throbius and Queen Bossum still discussed the forthcoming banquet with their high officials. Twisk gave the implet instructions; all three scuttled around to the back of the castle. Twisk, meanwhile, instructed both Travante and

Madouc in regard to the host-gifts which they must offer Throop.

The implets returned, again by a devious route, now carrying a bundle wrapped in a tatter of purple silk. They came stealthily, keeping to the shadows of the forest, where they called to Twisk in soft voices. "Come! Come! Come!"

Twisk spoke to the adventurers: "Let us move into a secluded place. King Throbius is extremely generous, most especially when he knows nothing of his given gifts."

Secure from observation, Twisk unwrapped the parcel, revealing a

golden vessel studded with carnelians and opals. Three spouts projected from the top, pointing in three directions.

"This is a vessel of great utility," said Twisk. "The first spout pours mead, the second crisp ale and the third wine of good quality. The vessel has an unexpected adjunct, to prevent unauthorized use. When this onyx bead is pressed, the yield of all three spouts alters for the worse. The mead becomes a vile and vicious swill; the ale would seem to be brewed from mouse droppings; the wine has become a vinous acid, mingled with tincture of blister-beetles. To restore goodness to the drink, one must touch this garnet

bead, and all is well. If the garnet bead is pressed during normal use, the three tipples take on a double excellence. The mead, so it is said, becomes a nectar of flowers saturated with sunlight. The ale takes on grandeur, while the wine is like the fabled elixir of life."

Madouc inspected the vessel with awe. "And if one were to press the garnet bead twice?"

"No one dares to contemplate these levels of perfection. They are reserved for the Sublime Entities."

"And what if the onyx bead were pressed twice?"

"Dark ichor of mephallim, cacodyl and cadaverine-these are the fluids yielded by the spouts."

"And thrice?" suggested Sir Pom-Pom.

Twisk made an impatient motion. "Such details need not concern us. Throop will covet the vessel, and it will become your host-gift. I can do no more save urge you to travel south, rather than north to Castle Doldil. And now: the afternoon is on the wane!" Twisk kissed Madouc, and said: "You may keep the pink and white kerchief; it will provide you shelter. If you live, perhaps we shall meet again."

## II

Madouc and Travante wrapped the golden vessel in the purple silk cloth and slung it over Sir Pom-Pom's sturdy shoulders.

With no more ado, they circled Madling Meadow and set off up Wamble Way.

On this pleasant afternoon there were comings and goings along the road. The three had travelled only a mile when from far ahead sounded the shrilling of fairy trumpets, growing ever louder and more brilliant. Down the road came dashing a cavalcade of six fairy riders, wearing costumes of black silk and

helmets of complex design. They rode black chargers of a strange sort: deep-chested, running low to the ground on taloned legs, their heads like black sheep-skulls with flaring green eyes. Pell mell the six fairy knights rode past, hunching low, black capes flapping, pale faces sardonic. The pounding of flailing feet receded; the shrilling of horns faded in the distance; the three wayfarers resumed their journey to the north.

Travante stopped short, then ran to peer into the forest. After a moment he turned away, shaking his head. "Sometimes I think it follows me, close at hand, whether from loneliness or a necessity which I cannot understand. Often I think I



glimpse it, but when I go to look, it is gone."

Madouc peered into the forest. "I could keep a better watch if I knew what to look for."

"It is now a bit soiled, and somewhat tatterdemalion," said Travante. "Still, all taken with all, I would find it useful and a fine thing to own."

"We will keep a sharp lookout," said Madouc, and added pensively: "I hope that I do not lose my youth in the same way."

Travante shook his head. "Never! You

are far more responsible than I was at your age."

Madouc gave a sad laugh. "That is not my reputation! I also worry about Sir Pom-Pom; he is heavier of mood than a boy his age should be. Perhaps it comes of working too long in the stables."

"So it may be!" said Travante. "The future will surely be full of surprises. Who knows what we might find should Throop throw open his great coffer?"

"Hardly likely! Even though Sir Pom-Pom brings a fine host-gift."

"My gift is less ostentatious in its value,

though Twisk insisted that it is quite suitable."

"Mine is little better," said Madouc. She pointed to Sir Pom-Pom, twenty yards ahead. "Notice how alert Sir Pom-Pom has become! What could have aroused his interest?"

The object in question came into view: a sylph of superlative beauty riding sidewise on a white unicorn, one knee folded, one slim leg negligently dangling. She wore only the golden strands of her long hair, and guided the unicorn by little tugs on its mane. The two made a striking picture, and Sir Pom-Pom, for one, was favorably

impressed.

The sylph halted her white steed, and inspected the three travellers with wide-eyed curiosity. "I bid you good afternoon," she said. "Where are you bound?"

"We are vagabonds, and each of us follows a dream," said Travante. "At the moment our quests take us toward Castle Doldil."

The sylph smiled a soft smile. "What you find may not be what you seek."

"We will carefully exchange courtesies with Sir Throop," said Travante. "Each

of us brings a valuable host-gift, and we expect a jovial welcome."

The sylph gave her head a dubious shake. "I have heard wails, groans, screams and plaintive moans from Castle Doldil, but never yet a jovial call."

"Sir Throop's nature is perhaps over-serious," said Travante.

"Sir Throop's nature is grim and his hospitality is precarious. Still, you undoubtedly know your own affairs best. Now I must ride on. The banquet starts when the fireflies come out, and I would not be late for the merriment." She

twitched at the unicorn's mane.

"One moment!" cried Sir Pom-Pom.

"Must you go so soon?"

The syiph tugged at the mane; the unicorn bowed its head and pawed at the ground.

"What is your need?"

Madouc spoke. "It is no great matter. Sir Pom-Pom admires the play of light in your long golden hair."

Sir Pom-Pom compressed his lips. "I might trade Holy Grail and all to ride with you to Thripsey Shee."

Madouc spoke curtly: "Control your

admiration, Sir Pom-Pom! This lady has better things to think about than your cold hands groping at her chest all the way to Madling Meadow."

The sylph broke into a happy laugh. "I must hurry! Goodbye, goodbye! For I know I shall never see you again!" She twitched at the white mane, and the unicorn paced off down Wamble Way.

"Come, Sir Pom-Pom!" said Madouc. "You need not stare quite so earnestly down the road."

Travante said gravely: "Sir Pom-Pom is admiring the unicorn's fine white tail."

"Hmf," said Madouc.

Sir Pom-Pom explained his interest. "I only wondered how she keeps warm when the breeze blows cold and damp!"

"For a fact," said Travante, "I wondered much the same."

"I looked closely," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I saw no trace of goose pimples."

"The topic lacks interest," said Madouc. "Shall we proceed?"

The three continued up Wamble Way. When the sun dropped behind the trees, Madouc selected an open area a few



yards away from the road, placed down the pink and white kerchief and at the call of 'Aroisus' raised the pink-and-white-striped pavilion.

The three entered to discover, as before, three soft beds, a table laden with fine food, four bronze pedestals supporting four lamps. They dined at leisure, but somberly, with the thoughts of each fixed upon Castle Doldil and the ogre Throop's uncertain hospitality; and when they took to their beds, none slept easily.

In the morning the adventurers arose, took breakfast, struck the pavilion and set off to the north, presently arriving at Idilra Crossroads. To the right Munkins

Road led eastward, at last to a junction with Icniel Way. To the left Munkins Road plunged ever deeper into the Forest of Tantrevalles.

The three travellers paused a few moments by Idilra Post; then, since there was no help for it, they turned to the left and with fatalistic steps set off along Munkins Road.

Halfway through the morning the three arrived at a clearing of goodly dimension, with a river running to one side. Beside the river stood the lowering mass of Castle Doldil. They stopped to survey the gray stone keep and the sward in front where so many brave knights had

come to grief. Madouc looked from Sir Pom-Pom to Travante. "Remember! Take nothing except that which is given! Throop will use all manner of wiles and we must be on the alert ten times over! Are we ready?"

"I am ready," said Travante.

"I have come this far," said Sir Pom-Pom in a hollow voice. "I would not turn back now."

The three left the shelter of the forest and approached on the castle. At once the portcullis rattled and two squat knights in black armour, with visors closed on their helmets and lances at the ready,

galloped from the castle yard. They rode four-legged gryphons with black-green scales; squat heads, half dragon, half wasp; and iron spikes in the place of winglets.

One of the knights cried out in a roaring voice: "What insolent folly brings trespassers to these private lands? We give you challenge; no excuse will be heard! Which of you will dare to do us combat?"

"None of us," said Madouc. "We are innocent wanderers and we wish to pay our respects to the famous Sir Throop of the Three Heads."

"That is all very well, but what do you bring with you, either for Sir Throop's profit or his amusement?"

"In the main, the vivacity of our conversation and the pleasure of our company."

"That is not very much."

"We also carry gifts for Sir Throop. Admittedly they are enriched more by our kind intentions than by their intrinsic worth."

"The gifts, from your description, would seem to be mean and niggardly."

"Even so, we want nothing in return."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

The goblin knights conferred in low mutters for a moment; then the foremost said: "We have decided that you are no more than starveling rogues. We are often obliged to protect good Sir Throop from such as you. Prepare yourselves for combat! Who will joust the first course with us?"

"Not I," said Madouc. "I carry no lance."

"Not I," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I ride no

horse."

"Not I," said Travante. "I lack armour, helmet and shield."

"Then we will exchange strong strokes of the sword, until one party or the other has been chopped into bits."

"Have you not noticed," asked Travante, "we carry no swords?"

"As you prefer! We shall strike at each other with cudgels until blood and brains spatter this green meadow."

Madouc, losing patience, directed the Tinkle-toe Imp-spring to ward the first

knight's fearsome mount. It gave a vibrant scream, leapt high; then, plunging and bucking, bounded this way and that, and at last fell into the river, where the knight, weighted down by his armour, sank quickly and was seen no more. The second knight raised a ferocious battle yell and lunged forward, lance levelled. Madouc directed the spell against the second gryphon, which jumped and tossed with even greater agility, so that the goblin knight was pitched high in the air, to fall on his head and lie still.

"Now then," said Madouc. "Let us try our luck with Sir Throop's hospitality."

The three passed under the open



portcullis, into an ill-smelling courtyard, with a row of parapets fifty feet above. On a tall door of iron-bound timber hung a massive knocker in the shape of a hellhound's head. Exerting all his strength Sir Pom-Pom lifted the knocker and let it fall.

A moment passed. Over the parapets leaned a great torso and three peering heads. The middle head called out in a rasping voice: "Who performs this ruthless noise which has disturbed my rest? Did not my minions give warning that at this time I take my comfort?"

Madouc responded as courteously as her quavering voice allowed. "They saw us,

Sir Throop, and ran away in terror."

"That is extraordinary conduct! What sort of persons are you?"

"Innocent travellers, no more," said Travante. "Since we were passing, we thought it proper to pay our respects. Should you see fit to offer us hospitality, we bring host-gifts, as is the custom in these parts."

Pism, the head to the left, uttered a curse: "Busta batasta! I keep but a single servant-my seneschal Naupt. He is old and frail; you must cause him no exasperation, nor put burdens upon his tired old shoulders! Nor may you pilfer

my valuable goods, at risk of my extreme displeasure!"

"Have no fear on that score!" declared Travante. "We are as honest as the day is long!"

"That is good to hear! See that your performance goes hand in hand with your boast."

The heads drew back from the parapet. A moment later a great booming voice was raised in harsh command: "Naup, where are you! Ah, you torpid old viper, where do you hide? Show yourself on the instant or prepare for a purple beating!"

"I am here!" cried a voice. "Ready as always to serve!"

"Bah batasta! Open the portal, admit the guests who wait without! Then go dig turnips for the great black kettle."

"Shall I also cut leeks, Your Honour?"

"Cut leeks by the score; they will make a tasty relish for the soup! First, admit the guests."

A moment later the tall portal swung ajar, with a creaking and groaning of the hinges. In the opening stood Naupt the seneschal: a creature mingled of troll, human man, and perhaps wefkin. In

stature he exceeded Sir Pom-Pom by an inch, though his corpulent torso surpassed that of Sir Pom-Pom by double. Gray fustian breeches clung tight to his thin legs and knobby knees; a tight gray jacket dealt with his thin arms and sharp elbows in the same fashion. A few damp black locks hung over his forehead; round black eyes bulged to either side of a long twisted nose. His mouth was a gray rosebud over a tiny pointed chin, with heavy soft jowls sagging to either side.

"Enter," said Naupt. "What names shall I announce to Sir Throop?"

"I am the Princess Madouc. This is Sir

Pom-Pom of Castle Haidion, or at least its back-buildings; and this is Travante the Sage."

"Very good, Your Honours! Come this way, if you will! Walk with delicate feet, that you do not unduly abrade the stone paving."

Naupt, running on tiptoe at a half-trot, led the three down a dark high-ceilinged corridor smelling sour-sweet of decay. Moisture oozed from cracks in the stone; tufts of gray fungus grew where the detritus of ages had settled into cracks.

The corridor turned, the floor humped and settled; the corridor twisted again

and opened into an enormous hall so high that the ceiling was lost in shadows. A balcony across the back wall supported a row of cages, now untenanted; along the walls hung a hundred shields, emblazoned with as many different emblems. Above each shield, a human skull wearing a knight's steel helmet looked from empty eye sockets across the hall.

Throop's furniture was crude, sparse and none too clean. A table of massive oak timbers stood in front of the fireplace, where burned a fire of eight logs. The table was flanked by a dozen chairs with another, three times ordinary size, at the head.

Naupht led the three into the center of the hail, then, hopping about on his thin legs, signalled the group to a halt. "I will announce your arrival to Sir Throop. You are the Princess Madouc, you are Sir Pom-Pom and you are Travante the Sage; am I correct?"

"You are almost correct," said Madouc. "That is Travante the Sage, and I am the Princess Madouc!"

"Ah! All is now explained! I will call Sir Throop; then I must make ready for Throop's evening meal. You may wait here. See that you take nothing that does not belong to you."



"Naturally not!" said Travante. "I am beginning to resent these imputations!"

"No matter, no matter. When the time comes you can never say that you were not warned." Naupht scurried away on his thin little legs.

"The hail is cold," grumbled Sir Pom-Pom. "Let us go stand by the fire."

"By no means!" cried Madouc. "Do you wish to become soup for Throop's supper? The logs which nourish the fire are not our property; we must avoid putting the warmth to our personal use."

"It is a most delicate situation," growled

Sir Pom-Pom. "I wonder that we dare breathe the air."

"That we may do, since the air is all-encompassing and not the property of Throop."

"That is good news." Sir Pom-Pom turned his head. "I hear steps approaching. Throop is on his way."

Throop entered the hall. He lumbered five long paces forward and inspected his guests with the full attention of his three heads. Throop was large and bulky, standing ten feet in height, with the chest of a bull, great round arms and gnarled legs, each as thick as the trunk of

a tree. The heads were round, heavy at the cheekbone, with round white-gray eyes, snub noses, and purple heavy-lipped mouths. Each head wore a cocked hat of a different color: Pism's hat was green; Pasm's liver-colored; Posm's, a jaunty mustard-ocher.

The three heads completed their survey. Pasm, at the center, spoke: "What is your purpose here, occupying space and taking shelter inside my Castle Doldil?"

"We came to pay our respects, in the fashion dictated by courtesy," said Madouc. "Your invitation to enter gave us no choice but to occupy space and take shelter."

"Bah batasta! That is a glib response. Why do you stand there like sticks?"

"We are anxious not to impose upon your good nature. Hence we await exact instructions."

Throop marched to the head of the table and seated himself in the great chair.

"You may join me at the table."

"Are we to sit on the chairs, Sir Throop, without regard for the wear we might cause?"

"Bah! You must be careful! The chairs are valuable antiques!"

"In that case, concern for you and your property would argue that we should stand."

"You may sit."

"In the warmth of the fire or otherwise?"

"As you choose."

Madouc detected a crafty ambiguity in the statement. She asked: "Without indebtedness or penalty?"

All of Throop's heads scowled together. "In your case I will make an exception and levy no charge for either fireheat or fire light."

"Thank you, Sir Throop." The three carefully seated them selves, and watched Throop in respectful silence.

Posm asked: "Are you hungry?"

"Not particularly," said Madouc. "Since we are casual guests, we are anxious not to consume food you might have reserved for yourself, or Naupt."

"You are gentility personified! Still, we shall see." Pism twisted his burly neck and called past Pasm's ear: "Naupt! Bring fruit! Let it be generous in scope!"

Naupt approached the table bearing a pewter tray piled high with mellow

pears, peaches, cherries, grapes and plums. He offered the tray first to Throop. "I will eat a pear," said Pism. "For me, a dozen of those luscious cherries," said Pasm. "Today I will devour a plum or two," said Posm.

Naupht offered the tray to Madouc, who gave a smiling refusal. "Thank you, but good manners force us to decline, since we have nothing to give in return."

Posm, grinning widely, said: "Each of you may taste one grape, free of obligation."

Madouc shook her head. "We might inadvertently break off the stem, or

swallow a seed, and thus exceed the value of your gift, to our embarrassment."

Pism scowled. "Your manners are very good, but somewhat tiresome, since they delay our own meal."

Posm said: "All this to the side, was there not some talk of host-gifts?"

"True!" said Madouc. "As you can see, we are modest folk, and our host-gifts, while of no large value, come feelingly from the heart."

Travante said: "Such gifts, after all, are the best! They deserve a deeper regard



than presentations of jewels or vials of rare perfume."

"Batasta," said Pism. "Each has its place in the scheme of things. What, then, do you bring for our pleasure?"

"All in good time," said Madouc. "At the moment I thirst, and I wish to drink."

"That can quickly be arranged!" declared Pism in great good humour. "Posm, am I correct in this remark?"

"The sooner the better," said Posm. "The day draws on and we have not yet started the kettle."

Pasm called: "Naupt, remove the fruit; bring goblets on the run, that we may drink!"

Naupt scuttled off with the fruit and returned with a tray of goblets, which he placed around the table. Madouc spoke politely to Throop: "These goblets are of good quality! Do you offer us their use freely and without obligation on our part?"

"We are not impractical theorists!" declared Pasm bluffly. "In order to drink, one needs a proper receptacle, similar in shape to a goblet. Otherwise, the liquid, when poured, falls to the floor!"

"In short, you may use these goblets without charge," stated Pism.

"Naup, bring the elderberry wine!" called Posm. "We wish to slake our thirsts!"

Madouc said: "As we drink, you may also consider the guest-gifts which it is incumbent upon you to offer in return. By the rules of gentility, such guest-gifts should be of value equal to that of the host-gift."

Pasm roared: "What foolish talk is this?"

Pism spoke with more restraint, and went so far as to wink at his brothers.

"There is no harm in such a discussion.  
Never forget our usual habit!"

"True!" said Posm with a chuckle.

"Naup, have you prepared sufficient  
onions for the soup?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

"Put them aside for the moment; there  
will be a short delay and the onions  
should not overcook."

"Just so, Your Honour."

"You may pour the elderberry wine  
which our guests have demanded for the  
slaking of their thirsts."

"By no means!" said Madouc. "We would never think to impose upon your generosity! Sir Pom-Pom, set out your golden vessel. I will drink mead."

Sir Pom-Pom arranged the vessel and from the first spout poured mead for Madouc.

Travante said: "I believe that I will drink good red wine to day."

Sir Pom-Pom poured full Travante's goblet from the appropriate spout. "As for myself, I will drink some fine cracking ale!"

From the last spout Sir Pom-Pom poured

foaming ale into his own goblet. Throop's three heads watched the operation in wonder, then all muttered into each other's ears. Pasm said aloud: "That is an excellent vessel!"

"So it is!" said Sir Pom-Pom. "And while we are on the subject, what do you know of the Holy Grail?"

All three heads instantly bent forward to stare at Sir Pom-Pom. "What is this?" demanded Pism. "Did you put a question?"

"No!" cried Madouc. "Of course not! Never! Not by so much as a breath! Nor an iota! You mis-heard Sir Pom-Pom!"

He said that better than all else he enjoyed his ale!"

"Hmf. Too bad!" said Pasm.

"Information is valuable," said Posm.

"We hold it dear!"

Pism said: "Since you have been allowed free and liberal use of the goblets, perhaps you would allow us to taste the product of that remarkable vessel!"

"Certainly!" said Madouc. "It is only good manners! How do your tastes incline?"

"I will drink mead," said Pism.

"I will drink wine," said Pasm.

"I will taste that smashing ale," said Posm.

Naupt brought goblets which Sir Pom-Pom filled from the vessel. Naupt then served to each of the heads its specified tippie.

"Excellent!" declared Pism.

"Tasty and of high quality!" said Pasm.

"Batasta!" cried Posm. "I have not tasted such ale for many a year!"



Madouc said: "Perhaps we should now offer our host-gifts. Then you may offer your guest-gifts in return and we will resume our journey."

"Bah batasta!" growled Pasm. "This talk of guest-gifts scratches harshly on my ear."

Pism once again winked a great white eye. "Have you forgotten our little joke?"

Posm said: "No matter! We must not cause our guests to wonder. Princess Madouc, so tender and sweet! What of your host-gift?"

"My offering is valuable; it is recent news of your beloved brother, the ogre Higlauf! Last month he defeated a troop of sixteen strong knights under the Cliffs of Kholensk. The king of Muscovy intends to reward him with a carriage drawn by six white bears, with a flanking escort of twelve Persian peacocks. Higlauf wears a new cloak of red-fox fur and tall fur hats on all his heads. He is well, save for a fistula on his middle neck; his leg is also a trifle sore from the bite of a mad dog. He sends his fraternal regards and invites your visit to his castle at High Tromsk on the Udovna River. And this news, which I hope will bring you joy, is my

host-gift."

All three heads blinked and sniffed in disparagement. "Ah, bah," said Posm. "The gift is of little value; I do not care a fig whether Higlauf's leg hurts or not, nor do I envy him his bears."

"I have done my best," said Madouc. "What of my guest-gift?"

"It shall be an item of equal worth, and not an owl's whisker more."

"As you like. You might give me news of my friend Sir Pelinore of Aquitaine, who passed this way some years ago."

"Sir Pellinore of Aquitaine?" The three heads ruminated, and consulted among themselves. "Pism, do you recall Sir Pellinore?"

"I am confusing him with Sir Priddelot, from Lombardy, who was so very tough. Posm, what of you?"

"I do not place the name. What were his arms?"

"Three red roses on a blue field."

"I recall neither the name nor the arms. Many if not most, or even all, of the visitors to Castle Doldil lack all morality, and think either to steal or

commit acts of treachery. These criminals are one and all punished and boiled into a nourishing soup, which is, in most cases, the most notable achievement of their otherwise futile lives. Their arms hang along the walls. Look, freely and without obligation: do you see the three red roses of your friend Sir Pellinore?"

"No," said Madouc. "Nothing of the sort is evident."

Posm called: "Naupt, where are you?"

"Here, Your Honour!"

"Look into the great register! Discover if

we have entertained a certain 'Sir Pellinore of Aquitaine.'

Naught hopped from the hall, returning a few moments later. "No such name is listed, either in the index, or in the memoranda of recipes. Sir Pellinore is not known to us."

"Then that is the answer I must give, and it fully discharges the requirement. Now then, Travante the Sage: what have you brought as host-gift?"

"It is an article of enormous value if used correctly; indeed, I have given my whole life to its acquisition! Sir Throop, for my host-gift, I present you with my

hard-won senility, my old age and the veneration which is its due. It is truly a valuable gift."

Throop's three heads grimaced, and the great arms pulled at the three beards, one after the other. Posm said: "How can you freely bestow a gift so valuable?"

"I do so out of regard for you, my host, in the hope that it brings you the same profit it has brought me. As for my guest-gift, you can restore to me the callow and insipid condition of youth, since I lost my own somewhere along the way. If by chance my lost youth is stored in one of your attics, I will once again take it in charge, and it will serve well

enough."

Pism called out: "Naupt, hither!"

"Yes, Your Honour?"

"You heard Travante's requirements; do we keep anything of that description stored among the castle lumber?"

"I am certain not, sir."

Throop turned his three heads back upon Travante. "In that case, you must keep your gift of senility, since I can make no responsive guest-gift, and that shall be an end to the transaction. Now then, Sir Pom-Pom: what have you to offer?"



"In truth, I have nothing whatever, save only my golden vessel."

Posm said quickly: "You need not apologize; that should be adequate."

"I agree," said Pasm. "It is a gift of great utility, unlike the more abstract gifts of the Princess Madouc and Travante the Sage."

"There is a single difficulty," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I would no longer have a utensil from which to drink. If you were able to provide me a suitable replacement-just some ordinary or even antique chalice, of two handles, and I would prefer a blue color-then I might

well use my own vessel as a host-gift."

Pism called: "Naught? Where do you keep yourself? Are you asleep by the stove? You must do better in the future or it shall be the worse for you!"

"As always, I do my best, Your Honour!"

"Attend me! Sir Pom-Pom needs a utensil from which to drink. Provide him with an article to his taste."

"Very good, Your Honour! Sir Pom-Pom, what are your needs?"

"Oh, just some rough old chalice, of two

handles, pale blue in color."

"I will inspect the closet, and perhaps I can discover a vessel to your taste."

Naupt ran off and presently returned with a number of cups, mugs and a chalice or two. None suited Sir Pom-Pom. Some were too wide, others too narrow; some too heavy, others an unsuitable color. Naupt ran back and forth until the table was covered with drinking utensils.

Throop became testy. Posm acted as spokesman. "Surely, Sir Pom-Pom, among this assortment is a vessel to meet your needs."

"Not really. This one is too big. This one is too squat. This one is bedizened with unsuitable decorations."

"Batasta, but you are fastidious in your drinking! We have no others to show you."

"I might even accept something in the Irish style," suggested Sir Pom-Pom.

"Ah," cried Naupt. "Remember that strange old chalice we took long ago from the Irish monk? Perhaps that might be in Sir Pom-Pom's style!"

"Just conceivably," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Fetch it here and let me see it."

"I wonder where I stored the old piece," mused Naupt. "I believe it is in the cupboard beside the entrance to the dungeons."

Naupt ran off, to return with a dusty old double-handled cup, of fair size, pale blue in color.

Madouc noticed that the rim was marred by a small chipped place, and that it otherwise resembled the drawing she had seen in the library at Haidion. She said: "If I were you, Sir Pom-Pom, I would accept this old cup and not dither any longer, even though it is old and chipped, and of no value whatever."

Sir Pom-Pom took the chalice in trembling hands. "I suppose it will serve me well enough."

"Good," said Pasm. "This affair of gifts and giving is now at an end, and we must take up other matters."

Posm called to Naupt: "Have you prepared a bill of damages?"

"Not yet, Your Honour!"

"You must include charges for the time we have wasted with the Princess Madouc and Travante the Sage. Sir Pom-Pom brought an article of value; both Madouc and Travante tried to

befuddle us with talk and nonsense!  
They must pay the penalty for their  
deceit!"

Posm said: "Put the onions into the pot  
and prepare the kitchen for our work."

Madouc licked her lips nervously, and  
spoke in a faltering voice: "You cannot  
be planning what I suspect you are  
planning!"

"Hah batasta!" declared Pism. "Your  
suspicions may not fall short of the  
truth!"

"But we are your guests!"

"And no less savory for all of that, especially with our special seasoning, of ramp and horseradish."

Pasm said: "Before we proceed with our work, perhaps we should enjoy a draught or two from our golden vessel of plenty."

"A good idea," said Posm.

Sir Pom-Pom rose to his feet. "I will demonstrate the best method of pouring. Naupt, bring tankards of large size! Pism, Pasm and Posm wish to drink deep of the stuff they love the best!"

"Just so," said Pasm. "Naupt, bring out



the great pewter tankards, that we may enjoy our draughts!"

"Yes, Your Honour."

Sir Pom-Pom busied himself at the golden vessel. "What then will each drink?"

Pism said: "I will take mead, in plenitude!"

Pasm said: "As before, I will drink red wine, in copious flow!"

Posm said: "I crave more of that walloping ale, and let it not all be foam in the tankard!"

Sir Pom-Pom poured from the three spouts, and Naupt carried the tankards to Throop of the Three Heads. "I bid you, raise your tankards high and drink deep! An amplitude remains in the vessel."

"Ha hah batasta!" cried Pasm. "One and all: drink deep!" Throop's two hands raised the three tankards, and poured the contents down the throats of Pism, Pasm and Posm all together.

Three seconds passed. Pism's great round face turned bright red and his eyes bulged three inches from his head, while his teeth clattered to the floor. Pasm's countenance seemed to vibrate and turn upside-down. Posm's face became as

black as coal and red flames darted from his eyes. Throop rose to his feet, to stand swaying. Within his great belly sounded first a rumble, then a muffled explosion and Throop fell over backward, in a tumble of unrelated parts. Travante stepped forward and taking up Throop's massive sword, hacked the three heads free of the body. "Naupt, where are you?"

"Here, sir!"

"Take up these three heads and throw them into the fire, at this instant, that they may be destroyed."

"As you say, sir!" Naupt carried the

heads to the fireplace and thrust them into the heart of the flames. "Watch to make sure that they are utterly consumed!" said Travante. "Now then: are prisoners pent in the dungeons?"

"No, Your Lordship! Throop ate them all, every one!"

"In that case there is nothing to delay our going."

"To the contrary," said Madouc in a faint voice. "Sir Pom-Pom, you evidently pushed the onyx bead, not once but twice?"

"Not twice," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I

pushed it a full five times, and once more for good measure. I notice that the vessel has collapsed into corroded fragments."

"It has served its purpose well," said Madouc. "Naup, we spare you your horrid little life, but you must alter your ways!"

"With pleasure and gratitude, Your Ladyship!"

"Henceforth you must devote your time to good works and a kindly hospitality toward wayfarers!"

"Just so! How glorious to be free of my

thralldom!"

"Nothing more detains us," said Madouc. "Sir Pom-Pom has found the object of his quest; I have learned that Sir Pellinore exists elsewhere; Travante is assured that his lost youth is not immured among the oddments and forgotten curios of Castle Doldil."

"It is something, but not much," sighed Travante. "I must continue my search elsewhere."

"Come!" said Madouc. "On this instant let us depart! I am sickened by the air!"

### III

The three travellers departed Castle Doldil at their best speed, giving a wide berth to the corpse of the goblin knight with the broken neck. They marched westward in silence along Munkins Road, which, according to Naupt would presently join the Great North-South Road. And many glances were turned backward, as if in expectation of something terrible coming in pursuit. But the way remained placid and the only sounds to be heard were of birds in the forest.

The three walked on, mile after mile, each preoccupied with his own concerns. At last Madouc spoke to Travante. "I have derived some benefit,

so I suppose, from this awful occasion. I can, at the very least, give a name to my father, and it would seem that he is alive. Therefore, I have not quested in vain. At Haidion I will make inquiries, and surely some grandee of Aquitaine will give me news of Pellinore."

"My quest has also been advanced," said Travante, without great conviction. "I can dismiss Castle Doldil from all future concerns. This is a small but positive gain."

"It is surely better than nothing," said Madouc. She called out to Sir Pom-Pom, who walked ahead. "What of you, Sir Pom-Pom? You have found the Holy



Grail and so you are successful in your quest!"

"I am dazed by events. I can hardly believe in my achievement!"

"It is real! You carry the Grail, and now may rely on the king's bounty."

"I must give the matter serious thought."

"Do not choose to wed the royal princess," said Madouc. "Some maidens sigh and fret; she uses both Sissle-way and Tinkle-toe with no remorse whatever."

"I have already made a decision on that

score," said Sir Pom-Pom shortly. "I want no spouse so willful and reckless as the royal princess."

Travante said, smiling: "Perhaps Madouc might become meek and submissive once she was married."

"I, for one, would not take such a risk," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Perhaps I shall marry Devonet, who is very pretty and remarkably dainty, though a trifle sharp of tongue. She berated me bitterly one day in regard to a loose surcingle. Still, failings such as hers can be cured by a beating or two." Sir Pom-Pom nodded slowly and reflectively. "I must give the matter thought."

For a time the road followed the river: beside pools shadowed under weeping willows, along reaches where reeds trembled to the current. At a ledge of gray rock, the river swung south; the road rose at an incline, dropped in a swoop, then veered away under enormous elms, with foliage glowing all shades of green in the afternoon sunlight.

The sun declined and dusk approached. As shadows fell over the forest, the road entered a quiet glade, empty save for the ruins of an old stone cottage. Travante looked through the doorway to find a compost of dust and mouldering leaves, an ancient table and a cabinet, to which, by some miracle the door still clung.

Travarite pulled open the door to find, almost invisible on a high shelf, a booklet of stiff parchment, the leaves bound between sheets of gray slate. He gave the booklet to Madouc. "My eyes are no longer apt for reading. Words blur and squirm, and reveal none of their secrets. It was not so in the old days, before my youth slipped away."

"You have suffered a serious loss," said Madouc. "As for remedy, you can surely do no more than what you are doing."

"That is my own feeling," said Travante. "I shall not be discouraged."

Madouc looked around the glade. "This

seems a pleasant place to pass the night, especially since dusk will soon be dimming the road."

"Agreed!" said Travante. "I am ready to rest."

"And I am ready to eat," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Today we were offered no food except Throop's grape, which we declined. Now I am hungry."

"Thanks to my kind mother, we shall both rest and dine," said Madouc. She laid out the pink and white kerchief and cried:

"Aroisus!" and raised the pavilion.

Entering, the travellers found the table laid as usual with a bounty of excellent comestibles: a roast of beef with suet pudding; fowl fresh from the spit and fish still sizzling from the pan; a ragout of hare and another of pigeons; a great dish of mussels cooked with butter, garlic and herbs; a salad of cress; butter and bread, salt fish, pickled cucumbers, cheeses of three sorts, milk, wine, honey; fried tarts, wild strawberries in clotted cream; and much else. The three refreshed themselves in basins of scented water, then dined to repletion.

In the light of the four bronze lamps Madouc examined the booklet taken from the cottage. "It appears to be an

almanac of sorts, or a collection of notes and advices. It was indited by a maiden who lived in the cottage. Here is her recipe for a fine complexion: 'It is said that cream of almonds mixed with oil of poppy is very good, if applied faithfully, and also a lotion of sweet alyssum drowned in the milk of a white vixen (Alas! Where would a white vixen be found?), then ground with a few pinches of powdered chalk. As for me, I command none of these ingredients and might not use them were they at hand, since who would trouble to notice?' Hmm." Madouc turned a page.

"Here is her instruction for training crows to speak. 'First, find a young crow

of alert disposition, jolly and able. You must treat it kindly, though you will clip its wings that it may not fly. For one month, add to its usual food a decoction of good valenan, into which you have seethed six hairs from the beard of a wise philosopher. At the end of the month you must say: "Crow, my dear crow: hear me now! When I raise my finger you must speak! Let your words be clever and to the point! So you shall make for the joy of us both, since we may relieve each other of our loneliness. Crow, speak!" 'I followed the instruction with every possible care, but my crows all remained mute, and my loneliness has never been abated.'



"Most odd," mused Sir Pom-Pom. "I suspect that the 'philosopher' from whose beard she plucked the six hairs was not truly wise, or possibly he deceived her with a display of false credentials."

"Possibly true," said Madouc.

"In such a lonely place, an innocent maiden might easily be deceived," said Travante. "Even by a philosopher."

Madouc returned to the booklet. "Here is another recipe. It is called 'Infallible Means for Instilling Full Constancy and Amatory Love in One Whom You Love.'

"That should be interesting," said Sir Pom-Pom. "Read the recipe, if you will, and with exact accuracy."

Madouc read:

*'When the dying moon wanders  
distract and, moving low in the  
sky, rides the clouds like a ghostly  
boat, then is the time to prepare,  
for a vapor often condenses and  
seeps down the shining rind, to  
hang as a droplet from the lower  
horn. It slowly, slowly, swells and  
sags and falls, and if a person,  
running below, can catch the  
droplet in a silver basin, he will  
have gained an elixir of many*

*merits. For me there is scope for much dreaming here, since, if a drop of this syrup is mixed into a goblet of pale wine and, if two drink together from the goblet, a sweet love is infallibly induced between the two. So I have made my resolve. One night when the moon rides low I will run from this place with my basin and never pause until I stand below the horn of the moon, and there I will wait to catch the wonderful droplet.'*

Travante asked: "Are there further notations?"

"That is all to the recipe."

"I wonder if the maiden did so run through the night, and whether, in the end, she caught her precious droplet!"

Madouc turned the parchment pages. "There is nothing more; the rain has blurred what remains."

Sir Pom-Pom rubbed his chin. He glanced toward the sacred chalice, where it reposed on a cushion; then he rose to his feet and, going to the front of the pavilion, looked out across the glade. After a moment he returned to the table.

Travante asked: "How goes the night, Sir Pom-Pom?"

"The moon is near the full and the sky is clear."

"Aha! Then there will be no seepage of moon syrup tonight!" Madouc asked Sir Pom-Pom: "Were you planning to run through the forest carrying a basin at the ready?"

Sir Pom-Pom responded with dignity: "Why not? A drop or two of the moon elixir might someday come in useful." He turned a quick glance toward Madouc. "I am still uncertain as to the boon I will ask."

"I thought that you had decided to become a baron and wed Devonet."

"Espousing a royal princess might be more prestigious, if you take my meaning."

Madouc laughed. "I take your meaning, Sir Pom-Pom, and henceforth I will be wary of your pale wine, though you offer it by the gallon on your bended knee."

"Bah!" muttered Sir Pom-Pom. "You are absolutely unreasonable."

"No doubt," sighed Madouc. "You must make do with Devonet."

"I will think on the matter."

In the morning the three continued along

Munkins Road, under great trees which filtered the morning sunlight. They travelled an hour, when suddenly Travante gave a startled cry. Madouc turned to find him staring into the forest.

"I saw it!" cried Travante. "I am sure of it! Look yonder; see for yourself!" He pointed, and Madouc looked to barely see a flash of movement under the trees. Travante cried out: "Hold! Do not go away! It is I, Travante!" He raced off into the forest, shouting: "Do not flee from me now! I see you plain! Will you not slow your pace; why are you so fleet of foot?"

Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom followed for

a space, then stopped to listen, hoping that Travante would return, but the cries grew fainter and ever fainter and at last could be heard no more.

The two returned slowly to the road, pausing often to look and listen, but the forest had become still. In the road, they waited an hour, walking slowly back and forth, but at last they reluctantly set off into the west.

At noon they arrived at the Great North-South Road. The two turned south, Sir Pom-Pom as usual in the lead.

Finally Sir Pom-Pom halted in exasperation and looked over his



shoulder. "I have had enough forest! The open country lies ahead; why do you tarry and loiter?"

"It happens without my knowing," said Madouc. "The reason I suppose is this: each step brings me closer to Haidion and I have decided that I am a better vagabond than princess."

Sir Pom-Pom gave a scornful grunt. "As for me, I am bored with this constant trudging through the dust! The roads never end; they simply join into another road, so that a wanderer never comes to his journey's end."

"That is the nature of the vagabond."

"Bah! It is not for me! The scenery shifts with every ten steps; before one can start to enjoy the view it is gone!"

Madouc sighed. "I understand your impatience! it is reasonable! You want to present the Holy Grail to the church and win grand honours for yourself."

"The honours need not be so grand," said Sir Pom-Pom. "I would like the rank of baron or knight, a small estate with a manor house, stables, barn, sty, stock, poultry and hives, a patch of quiet woodland and a stream of good fishing."

"So it may be," said Madouc. "As for me, if I did not want Spargoy the Chief

Herald to identify Sir Pellinore, I might not go back to Haidion at all."

"That is folly," said Sir Pom-Pom.

"So it may be," said Madouc once again.

"In any event, since we have decided to return, let us not delay."

## IV

At Old Street Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom turned west until they arrived at the village Frogmarsh and the road south, sometimes known as 'the Lower Way', which led to Lyonesse Town.

During the afternoon clouds began to loom in the west; toward evening trails of rain brushed the landscape. In a convenient meadow, behind a copse of olive trees, Madouc raised the pavilion, and the two rested warm and secure while the rain drummed on the fabric. For much of the night lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, but in the morning the clouds had broken and the sun rose bright to shine upon a world fresh and wet.

Madouc reduced the pavilion; the two continued down the road: into a region of pinnacles and gorges, between the twin crags Maegher and Yax-known as the Arqueers-then out under the open sky

and down a long rolling slope, with the Lir visible in the distance.

From behind came the rumble of galloping hooves. The two moved to the side of the road, and the riders passed by: three rakehelly young noblemen, with three equerries riding at their backs. Madouc looked up at the same moment Prince Cassander glanced aside and into her face. For a fleeting instant their eyes met, and in that time Cassander's face sagged into a mask of ack Vance disbelief. With a flapping arm he waved his comrades to a halt, then wheeled his horse and trotted back, to learn whether or not his eyes had deceived him.

Cassander reined up his horse near Madouc and his expression changed to half-scornful half-pitying amusement. He looked Madouc up and down, darted a glinting blue glance at Sir Pom-Pom, then gave a chuckle of incredulous laughter. "Either I am hallucinating or this unkempt little ragamuffin lurking beside the ditch is the Princess Madouc! Sometimes known as Madouc of the Hundred Follies and the Fifty Crimes!"

Madouc said stiffly: "You may put aside that tone of voice, since I am neither fool nor criminal, nor yet do I lurk."

Cassander jumped down from his horse. The years had changed him, thought

Madouc, and not for the better. His amiability had disappeared under a crust of vanity; his self-conscious airs made him seem pompous; with his highly colored face, tight brassy curls, petulant mouth and hard blue eyes, he seemed a callow replica of his father. In measured tones he answered Madouc: "Your condition lacks dignity; you bring ridicule upon us all."

Madouc gave a stony shrug. "If you do not like what you see, look elsewhere."

Cassander threw back his head and laughed. "Your appearance is not so bad, after all; in fact, travel seems to become you! But your deeds do a

disservice to the royal house."

"Ha!" said Madouc in scorn. "Your own deeds are not above criticism. In fact, they are a scandal, as everyone knows."

Cassander laughed again, if uneasily. His comrades joined the amusement. "I am speaking of different deeds," said Cassander. "Shall I enumerate? Item: you created a furore of hysterical inquiries. Item: you instigated a thousand recriminations which were discharged willy-nilly in all directions. Item: you have nourished a volume of angers, carks, resentments and sore emotions beyond all estimate. Item: you have focused upon yourself a full spate of



bitter reproaches, not to mention threats, judgments and curses. Item:-"

"Enough," said Madouc. "It seems that I am not popular at Haidion; you need not proceed. It is all beside the point, and you yourself speak from ignorance."

"Just so. The fox in the poultry-run cannot be blamed for the cackling of the pullets."

"Your jokes are too airy for my understanding."

"No matter," said Cassander. He jerked his thumb toward Sir Pom-Pom. "Is this not one of the stableboys?"

"What of that? King Casmir allowed me horses and an escort. Our horses were stolen, so now we go afoot."

"For a royal princess a stableboy is not suitable escort."

"I have no complaints. Sir Pom-Pom, or Pymfyd, as you know him, has conducted himself well and our quests have been for the most part successful."

Prince Cassander shook his head in wonder. "And what were these marvellous quests, that His Majesty should approve them so readily?"

"Sir Pom-Pom went in search of holy

relics, in accordance with the king's proclamation. I went to establish my pedigree, by the king's own order."

"Odd, most odd!" said Cassander.

"Perhaps the king was distracted and paid no heed; there is much on his mind. We will travel to Avallon in a day or so for a great colloquy, and His Majesty perhaps did not understand what was afoot. As to your pedigree, what have you learned, if anything?"

Madouc glanced haughtily at Cassander's grinning comrades. "It is not a matter to be aired before underlings."

The mirth of Cassander's friends froze

on their faces.

"As you like," said Cassander. He looked back to the three equerries. "You, Parlitz, dismount and ride behind Ondel; the princess shall use your horse. You, my lad-" he pointed to Sir Pom-Pom "-you may ride behind Wullam on the bay. Come now, promptly does it! We must be home by noon!"

Along the way Cassander rode by Madouc's side and tried to make conversation. "How did you learn your pedigree?"

"I consulted my mother."

"How did you find her?"

"We went to Madling Meadow, which is deep in the Forest of Tantrevalles."

"Aha! Is that not dangerous?"

"Extremely, if one is careless."

"Hmf! And did you encounter such dangers?"

"We did, for a fact."

"And how did you evade them?"

"My mother has taught me a few trifles of fairy magic."

"Tell me about this magic!"

"She does not like me to discuss such things. Still, some time I will tell you of our adventures. I am not in the mood to do so now."

Cassander spoke austerely: "You are a strange little creature! I wonder what will become of you!"

"Often I wonder the same."

"Ha bah!" declared Cassander in his most positive manner. "One thing is certain, if nothing else! Destiny frowns on unruly little itlings who expect everyone to dance whenever they play

their tunes!"

"It is not quite so simple," said Madouc, without any great interest.

Cassander fell silent, and so the party rode on toward Lyonesse Town. After a mile or two, Cassander spoke again.

"Do not expect a gala reception-if only because we depart for Avallon on the day after tomorrow."

"I have been wondering about this journey. What is the occasion?"

"It is a grand colloquy called by King Audry at King Casmir's suggestion, and all the kings of the Elder Isles will be on

hand."

Madouc said: "I return at a lucky time! If I had delayed two days longer, I would have been too late for the journey."

After a thoughtful pause she said: "And the history of the Elder Isles might have veered in sudden new directions."

"Eh? What is that you say?"

"It concerns a concept which you mentioned only moments ago."

"I recall no such concept."

"You mentioned 'Destiny'."



"Oh, ah! So I did! I am still perplexed. What is the connection?"

"No matter. I spoke at random."

Cassander said, with pointed politeness:  
"I am obliged to mention once more that you are not in good odour at Haidion, and no one will be anxious to gratify your desires."

"To what effect?"

"It may be that you will not be asked to join the royal party."

"We shall see."

The group rode down the Sfer Arct, rounded the tree-covered bluff known as Skanseas Vantage, and all of Lyonesse Town was spread wide before their eyes, with Castle Haidion bulking large in the foreground. Ten minutes later the troop turned into the King's Parade and halted in front of the castle. Cassander jumped to the ground and with a courtly flourish assisted Madouc to alight.

"Now we shall see," said Cassander.

"Do not expect a warm reception and you will not be disappointed. The most charitable term I have heard applied to you is 'recklessly insubordinate.'"

"Those ideas are not correct, as I have already explained to you!"

Cassander gave a sardonic laugh. "You must prepare to explain again, and with considerably more humility, or so I would suggest."

Madouc made no comment. In a not unkindly voice Cassander said: "Come! I will take you into the presence of the king and queen, and perhaps in some degree soften their shock."

Madouc signalled to Sir Pom-Pom. "You must come too. We shall go in together."

Cassander looked from one to the other. "That is surely unnecessary!" He gestured toward Sir Pom-Pom. "Be off with you, boy; we need you no more. Get

back to your duties as quickly and furtively as possible and make what peace you can with the stableemaster."

"Not so!" said Madouc. "Sir Pom-Pom must remain in our company, for a most important reason, as you will presently discover."

Cassander shrugged. "Just as you like; let us go do what must be done."

The three entered the castle. In the great gallery they came upon Sir Mungo the High Seneschal. Cassander asked: "Where are the king and queen to be found?"

"You will find them in the Green Parlour, Your Highness. They have just finished their repast, and now sit over cheese and wine."

"Thank you, good Sir Mungo."

Cassander led the way to the Green Parlour, only to discover that King Casmir's place was empty. Queen Sollace sat with three of her favorites, all nibbling grapes from a wide wicker basket. Cassander stepped forward, and bowed politely: first to the queen, then to the other ladies, and the conversation stopped short. Cassander asked:

"Where, may I ask, is His Highness the King?"

Queen Sollace, still unaware of Madouc's presence, said: "He has gone early to his Seat of Judgment, that he may perform his necessary acts of justice before we leave for Avallon."

Cassander brought Madouc forward, and announced with rather forced facetiousness: "I have here a pleasant surprise! Look who we found along the way!"

Queen Sollace stared at Madouc with mouth agape. The ladies-in-waiting made small hissing noises and titters of wonder and surprise. Queen Sollace closed her mouth with a snap. "So the little miscreant has decided to show

herself again!"

Cassander said in a courtly voice: "Your Highness, I suggest that for the purpose of your consultation with the princess, privacy is appropriate."

"Quite so," said Sollace. "Ladies, be good enough to leave us now."

The ladies, with covert glances of curiosity toward Madouc and veiled annoyance for Cassander, departed the chamber. Queen Sollace again turned her gaze upon Madouc. "Now then, perhaps you will explain your truancy! It has been the source of our great concern. Tell us: where have you been hiding?"

"With all respect, Your Highness, I must state that you have been misinformed. I have not been hiding, nor have I performed any mischiefs. Indeed, I set forth on a quest which was sanctioned by His Majesty, the King, and I was expelled from your presence and from Haidion by your own words."

Queen Sollace blinked. "I remember none of this! You are formulating spiteful tales! The king was as nonplussed as I!"

"Surely he will remember the circumstances! At his behest I went to learn the identity of my father and the condition of my pedigree. I have acted



only within the scope allowed me by Your Majesties!"

Sollace's face became mulish. "It is possible that one or the other made an absentminded remark which you chose to twist to fit your own wishes. I deplore such tactics!"

"I am sorry to hear this, Your Majesty, especially since these tactics have worked to your great benefit!"

Once again Queen Sollace stared in wonder. "Do I hear you aright?"

"Indeed you do, Your Highness! Prepare yourself for an announcement which will

stupefy you with joy!"

"Ha!" said Sollace sourly. "I cannot say that I am hopeful on this account."

Prince Cassander, standing to the side and smiling in lofty amusement, said: "We are listening with keen attention! Announce away!"

Madouc brought Sir Pom-Pom forward. "Your Highness, allow me to introduce Pymfyd, whom I have dubbed 'Sir Pom-Pom', by reason of his bravery in my service. Sir Pom-Pom served as my loyal escort, and also went questing on your behalf. At Thripsey Shee we heard mention of the Holy Grail, and

immediately became attentive."

Queen Sollace jerked herself erect.

"What? Can it be so? Say on and quickly! You speak the dearest words my ear could hear! Was the information at all circumstantial? Tell me in exact terms what you learned!"

"We heard a rumour that the Grail was guarded by the ogre Throop of the Three Heads, and that a hundred brave knights had died in the attempt to liberate it."

"And where is it now! Speak! Tell me at once! I am beside myself with excitement!"

"Just so, Your Highness! Throop immured the Grail in a closet of his Castle Doldil, deep within the Forest of Tantrevalles."

"That is absolutely important news! We must assemble an army of godly knights and march on an expedition of deliverance! Cassander, go this instant to inform His Highness the King! All else is trivial."

"Hear me out, Your Highness!" cried Madouc. "I am not yet done! With advice from my mother Sir Pom-Pom and I presented ourselves at Castle Doldil; and there, with bravery unsurpassed, Sir Pom-Pom inflicted death upon Throop

and won the Holy Grail, which he has carried back to Lyonesse Town wrapped in purple silk, and which he will now place before you. Sir Pom-Pom, you may present the Holy Grail."

"I cannot believe this!" cried Queen Sollace. "I am in a state of entrancement, or ecstasy of the ninth order!"

Sir Pom-Pom stepped forward and gravely removed the wrapping of purple silk from the chalice; on bended knee he placed the sacred object on the table before Queen Sollace. "Your Majesty, I hereby offer you this Holy Grail! I hope that you will cherish it with joy, and also that you will grant me the boon of my

desires as stated in the king's proclamation."

Queen Sollace, her eyes fixed on the Grail, was numb to all else. "Glory of glories! I marvel that this unction has been yielded to me! I am confounded by rapture! It is beyond belief; it is beyond all ordinary scope!"

Madouc said primly: "Your Highness, I must call to your attention that you have Sir Pom-Pom to thank for the presentation of this Grail!"

"Indeed this is so! He has done a magnificent service for the Church, and on behalf of the Church I render him my

full and royal thanks! He shall be well rewarded! Cassander, at this moment give the lad a gold piece as an earnest of my favor!"

Cassander brought a gold coin from his pouch and pressed it into Sir Pom-Pom's hand. "Do not thank me; thank the queen for her generosity!"

Queen Sollace called out to the footman who stood immobile by the door. "Bring Father Umphred here at once, that he may share our joy! Hurry, run on your fastest feet! Tell Father Umphred only that glorious news awaits him!"

Sir Mungo the High Seneschal entered

the parlour. "Your Highness, I notified His Majesty in regard to the Princess Madouc. He wishes me to bring her and her companion to the Hall of Judgments."

Queen Sollace made an absentminded gesture. "You have my permission to leave. Madouc, you too have worked for the Good, and in my great happiness I discharge you of blame for your transgressions! But in the future you must learn tractability!"

Sir Pom-Pom spoke diffidently: "Your Highness, what of the boon promised by the king? When should I make my wants known, and when will the boon be



granted?"

Queen Sollace frowned somewhat impatiently. "In due course any feasible arrangements will be considered. In the meantime, you already have what is best of all: which is to say, the knowledge of how well you have served our Church and our Faith!"

Sir Pom-Pom stammered something incoherent, then bowed and backed away. Sir Mungo said: "Princess Madouc, you may come with me at this time, along with your companion."

Sir Mungo led the two by a side corridor into the ancient Old Hall, through a

portal in a dank stone wall out upon a landing, from which a stone ramp descended past monumental stone columns to give into the solemn spaces of the Hall of Judgments.

On a low dais sat King Casmir, wearing the traditional vestments of judgment: a black robe with black gloves, a square of black velvet on his head with gold tassels dependent and a gold fillet above. He sat on a massive throne with a small table before him; to either side of the dais stood a pair of men-at-arms clad in shirts and breeches of black leather relieved only by epaulettes and brassards of black iron. Helmets of iron and leather clasped their faces, lending

them a sinister aspect. Those unfortunate individuals awaiting judgment sat on a bench to one side of the hall, in attitudes of gloom. Those who had already been tortured stared blankly into space, eyes as empty as knotholes.

Sir Mungo brought Madouc and Sir Pom-Pom before the king. "Your Highness, I bring you the Princess Madouc and her companion, as you have requested."

King Casmir leaned back in his throne and, frowning, considered the two.

Madouc curtsied primly. "I trust Your Majesty enjoys good health."

King Casmir's face altered by not so much as a quiver. At last he spoke. "It seems that Prince Cassander surprised you beside the road. Where have you been and what has been your mischief, to the disgrace of the royal house?"

Madouc spoke haughtily: "Your Majesty has been shamefully misinformed! Far from being surprised by Prince Cassander, we were returning at best speed to Lyonesse Town. Prince Cassander and his friends overtook us along the way. We neither lurked, skulked, hid, lied, nor in any way compromised our dignity. As for mischief and disgrace, Your Majesty again has been victimized by

misinformation, since I did no more than obey your instructions."

King Casmir leaned forward, the pink rising in his already florid face. "I instructed you to skite off into the wilderness, taking neither proper escort nor proper protection?"

"Just so, Your Majesty! You ordered me to discover my pedigree as best I could, and not to trouble you with the details."

King Casmir slowly swung his head so as to stare at Sir Pom Pom. "You are the stableboy who supplied the horses?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your folly in this respect verges upon criminal negligence. Do you think yourself a proper and adequate escort for a royal princess under such circumstances?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, since that has been my occupation. I have long served the princess faithfully and there has never been aught but approval for the quality of my service."

King Casmir leaned back once again. In a slow cold voice he inquired: "You perceive no more hazard in a long journey by night and day, through strange parts and dangerous wilderness, than an afternoon's outing in the meadows at

Sarris?"

"Sire, there is a difference indeed. But you must know that, on the basis of your proclamation, I had already decided to go questing for holy relics."

"That is not germane to the wrongfulness of your conduct."

Madouc spoke out angrily: "Your Majesty, I commanded him to this conduct; he is guilty only of obedience to my orders."

"Ha hah! And if you had ordered him to set fire to Castle Haidion, so that it burned in roaring flames, and he did so,

would that make him no more than a dutiful servant?"

"No, Your Majesty, but-"

"To fulfill his duty best he should have notified someone in authority of your demands, and requested official permission. I have heard enough. Bailiff, take this person behind the Peinhador for a flogging of seven strokes, for his better instruction in prudent conduct."

Madouc cried out: "Your Majesty, one moment! You are pronouncing sentence too roundly and too rapidly. Both Pymfyd and I went out on our separate quests, and both of us were successful. I



learned the name of my father, while Pymfyd did you and the queen a notable service; he killed the ogre Throop and brought away the Holy Grail which he only just now presented to Her Majesty. She is ecstatic with joy! By your proclamation, Sir Pom-Pom has earned a boon!"

King Casmir smiled a small smile. "Bailiff, reduce the flogging to six strokes and allow this tow-headed gossoon the resumption of his post at the stable. That shall be his boon."

"Come, sirrah!" said the bailiff. "This way, come!" He led Sir Pom-Pom from the hall.

Madouc looked at King Casmir aghast. "But you gave me full permission to do what I did! You told me to take an escort, and always I had taken him before!"

King Casmir made a sharp gesture with his clenched right hand. "Enough! You must understand meanings rather than words. You thought to trick me and the fault is yours."

Madouc, looking into Casmir's eyes, saw new meanings and took new understandings, which caused her to flinch. She held her face composed, though now she hated Casmir with all her being.

King Casmir spoke: "You learned the identity of your father, then. What is his name?"

"He is a certain Sir Pellinore of Aquitaine, Your Majesty."

King Casmir considered. "Sir Pellinore? The name has a familiar ring. Somewhere I have encountered it; perhaps long ago."

He turned to the High Seneschal. "Bring me here Spargoy the Herald."

Spargoy the Chief Herald presented himself. "Sire, your wishes?"

"Who is Sir Pellinore of Aquitaine?  
Where is his seat and what are his  
connections?"

'Sir Pellinore', Sire? Someone has  
spoken in jest." "What do you mean by  
that?"

"Sir Pellinore is a creature of fancy! He  
exists only in the romantic fables of  
Aquitaine, where he does marvellous  
deeds and woos lovely maidens and  
travels far and wide on wonderful  
quests! But that is all there is to Sir  
Pellinore."

King Casrnir looked at Madouc. "Well,  
then? What now?"

"Nothing," said Madouc. "Have I your leave to go?"

"Go"

V

Madouc went on laggard feet to her old chambers. She stood in the doorway looking to right and left, at objects and articles which at one time had brought her comfort. The rooms, which she had thought so large and airy, seemed barely adequate. She summoned a maid and ordered hot water for her bath. Using mild yellow soap imported from Andalusia, she scrubbed herself and her

copper-gold curls, and rinsed in water scented with lavender. Looking through her wardrobe, she discovered that her old garments now fit her somewhat too snugly. Strange, thought Madouc; how quickly the time went by! She studied her legs; they were still taut and slender, but-was it her imagination?- they looked somehow different than she remembered them; and her breasts were at least perceptible, if anyone troubled to look.

Madouc gave a fatalistic sigh. The changes were coming faster than she might have liked. She finally found a costume which still fit her nicely; a loose skirt of pale blue homespun and a white blouse embroidered with blue

flowers. She brushed out her curls and tied them back with a blue ribbon. Then she went to sit in her chair and look from the window.

There was much to reflect upon: so much that her mind whirled from place to place, with ideas darting in and out, never staying long enough to take full shape. She thought of Sir Pellinore, Twisk, King Casmir in his black robes, and poor Sir Pom-Pom with his stricken face. Here she averted her mind for fear that she would become sick. Zerling, were he to apply the strokes, would surely do so without undue energy, to allow Sir Pom-Pom the flesh and skin of his back.

Thoughts swirled around the edges of her attention like moths around a flame. One set of such thoughts was more persistent than the others and nagged at her notice, insisting on its importance. These thoughts were connected with the forthcoming visit of the royal family to Avallon. Madouc had not been invited to join the group, and half-suspected that neither Queen Sollace nor King Casmir would trouble to do so-even though Prince Cassander would be on hand, together with princes and princesses from other courts of the Elder Isles-including Prince Dhrun of Troicinet. And she would not be there! The idea brought her a queer little pang, of a sort



she had never known before.

For a space Madouc sat looking from her window with the image of Dhrun before her mind. And she found herself yearning for his company. It was a sensation melancholy and hurtful, yet somehow pleasant, and so Madouc sat dreaming.

Another idea entered her mind: a notion at first casual and then gradually becoming harsh and grim and frightening as it took on dimension. At Falu Ffail were the Round Table Cairbra an Meadhan and Evandig, the ancient throne of the Palaernon kings. The first-born son of Suldrun-so went the rhyme of

Persilian the Magic Mirror-would sit at Cairbra an Meadhan and rule from Evandig before his death. This prophecy, according to Twisk, had become King Casmir's torment and his preoccupation, so that his days were taken up with devious plots and his nights with schemes of murder.

At Falu Ffail King Casmir, the Round Table, the throne Evandig and Prince Dhrun would be in proximity. The situation could not have escaped the attention of King Casmir; indeed, according to Cassander, he had proposed the colloquy to King Audry.

Madouc jumped to her feet. She must be

included in the party journeying to Avallon. If not, then she would once again take leave of Haidion, and this time she would never return.

Madouc found the queen in her private parlour, in company with Father Urnphred. Madouc entered so unobtrusively that Queen Sollace seemed not to notice her coming. At the center of a table, on a golden platter, rested the sacred blue chalice. Queen Sollace sat rapt in contemplation of the fabulous vessel. At her side Father Umphred stood, plump arms clasped behind his back, also engrossed in a study of the Grail. Elsewhere around the chamber a number of the queen's

intimates sat murmuring together, pitching their voices at a low level so as not to disturb the queen in her reverie.

Father Umphred noticed Madouc's arrival. Bending, he spoke into the queen's ear. Sollace raised her head and looked half blankly around the chamber. She saw Madouc and beckoned. "Come hither, Princess! There is much we would know."

Madouc advanced and performed a grave curtsey. "I am at the disposal of Your Highness, of course, and I have much to tell. It will be, I am sure, to your great fascination."

"Speak! We wish to hear all!"

"Your Highness, allow me a suggestion! The telling will dissolve boredom during the journey to Avallon. If I tell you bits and incidents piecemeal, you will not appreciate the scope of our adventure nor the desperate manner in which we won the Grail."

"Ha, hmm," said Queen Sollace. "I had not expected that you would be attending us on the journey. But, now that I reflect, it seems quite appropriate. There will be a number of notables present at King Audry's court, and perhaps you will attract favorable attention."

"In that case, Your Highness, I must immediately enlarge my wardrobe, since none of my old gowns are now suitable."

"We will instantly take this matter in hand. Two nights and a day intervene before our departure; this should be time

enough." Queen Sollace signalled to one of her maids. "Have the seamstresses set to work at once. I stipulate not only haste and creditable workmanship, but also color and style appropriate to Madouc's years and innocence. There need be no bedizenry of precious gems or yellow gold; such adjuncts would go unnoticed on this barely female slip of a kitkin."

"As your Highness commands! I suggest that the princess come with me now, that the work may be expedited!"

"Sensible and to the point! Madouc, you have my leave to go."

## VI

The dressmakers brought out their fabrics, and consulted among themselves as to the nature and scope of their undertaking. Madouc, still smarting from Queen Sollace's deprecatory instructions, listened with head cocked sidewise. At last she intervened. "You are talking for naught! I want none of

your sallow yellows or pasty ecrus or horse-vomit greens, and you must reconsider your styles!"

the senior seamstress, spoke with concern. "How so, Your Highness? We are bound to sew what is genteel and suitable!"

"You are bound to sew what I will consent to wear; otherwise your work will be wasted."

"Of course, Your Highness! We want you to be happy and at ease in your garments!"

"Then you must sew as I direct. I will



not wear these blooming pantaloons or these bloodless bodices that you are discussing."

"Ah, Your Highness, these are what young maidens of your age are wearing."

"That is the least of my concerns."

Hulda sighed. "Ah well, then! How does Your Highness wish to be dressed?"

Madouc indicated a bolt of cornflower blue and another of nubbled white linen. "Use this and this. And here: what is this?"

She pulled from the case a somewhat

scant bolt of dark red velvet, soft of texture, of color so deep as to verge upon black.

"That is a hue known as 'Black Rose'," said Hulda in a dispirited voice. "It is quite unsuitable for a person of your age, and also, it is little more than a scrap."

Madouc paid no heed. "This is a most beautiful stuff. Also, there seems to be just enough to wrap around my skin."

Hulda said hurriedly: "There is not enough cloth for a proper girl's gown, with such pleats, flounces, swags and fullness as style and modesty dictate."

"Then I will have a gown without these decorations, because I am ravished by the color."

Hulda attempted expostulation, but Madouc would not listen. She pointed out that time was limited and that the gown of Black Rose velvet must be cut and sewed before all else, and so it was, despite Hulda's misgivings. "Truly, the material is scanty! The gown will fit you more explicitly than your age would seem to necessitate."

"That is as may be," said Madouc. "I believe the costume will have great charm, and for some strange reason the color is in accord with my hair."

"I must admit that the gown will probably become you," said Hulda grudgingly. "If in a manner somewhat premature."

# CHAPTER TEN

## I

The sun rose into a dreary sky, with clouds driving in from the Lir portending storms and rain for the journey to Avallon. Ignoring the dismal prospect, King Casmir and Prince Cassander had ridden from Haidion before dawn, that they might visit Fort Mael along the way. At the castle Ronart Cinquelon, near Tatwillow, where Old Street met Icnield Way, they would rejoin the main party and continue the journey north.

In due course, Queen Sollace, languid

and yawning, rose from her bed. She made her breakfast upon porridge and cream, a dozen dates stuffed with soft cheese, and a heartening dish of sweetbreads seethed in milk and cinnamon. During her meal Sir Mungo, the High Seneschal, came to inform her that the royal carriages, escort, equipage, and all else awaited her convenience in the King's Parade.

Queen Sollace responded with a sad grimace. "Do not remind me, good Sir Mungo! I anticipate only discomfort, bad, smells and monotony; why could not the colloquy be called here at Haidion, if only for my sake?"

"As to that, Your Majesty, I cannot say."

"Ah! What is, is! This I have learned with brutal emphasis over the years! So it is now and I must endure the nuisance with all good grace!"

Sir Mungo bowed. "I will await Your Majesty in the Octagon."

Sollace was dressed; her hair was coiled and coiffed; her face and hands were refreshed with balm of almonds, and finally she was ready for the journey.

The carriages waited below the terrace, along the King's Parade. Queen Sollace

came from the castle and crossed the terrace, pausing occasionally to address last-minute instructions to Sir Mungo, who responded to each of her requirements with the same urbane equanimity.

Queen Sollace descended to the Parade and was assisted into the royal carriage. She settled herself into the cushions and a robe of baby-fox fur was tucked across her lap. Madouc then entered the carriage, followed by Lady Tryffyn and Lady Sipple, and last by a certain Damsel Kylas, who had lately been appointed to attend Madouc.

All was in readiness. Queen Sollace



nodded to Sir Mungo, who stood back and signalled the heralds. They blew three 'Royal Retreat' fanfares, and the cortege moved off across the King's Parade. The procession turned up the Sfer Arct, and the company settled itself for the journey. Madouc sat beside Queen Sollace. Facing her was Damsel Kylas, a maiden sixteen years old, of high principles and dedicated rectitude, though Madouc found her tiresome, lacking both charm and wit. Prompted either by vanity or by exaggerated sensitivity, Kylas suspected that all men, young and old, who passed nearby had come to ogle her and perhaps make improper advances. The conviction caused her to bridle and toss her head,

whether the man looked in her direction or not. The habit puzzled Madouc, since her thin shoulders and large hips, saturnine face with its long nose, black protuberant eyes and bundles of wiry black curls hanging to each side, like panniers on a donkey, created no image of memorable beauty. It was Kylas' habit to stare with fixed and unblinking attention at an object of interest.

Madouc, sitting opposite, was unable to evade the scrutiny. She thought to fight fire with fire, and for five minutes focused her gaze on the tip of Kylas' nose, without effect. Madouc became bored, and turned away in defeat.

The procession entered the Arqueers; at

the same time the weather which earlier had presaged so poorly, changed; clouds and mist dissolved; the sun shone bright upon the landscape. Queen Sollace said, somewhat complacently: "This morning I prayed that the weather be kind to us, and make our journey safe and pleasant, and so it is."

Lady Tryffyn, Lady Sipple and Kylas uttered appropriate sounds of wonder and gratification. Queen Sollace arranged a basket of honeyed figs conveniently to hand and spoke to Madouc. "Now, my dear, you may recount all concerning the recovery of the Blessed Grail!"

Madouc looked around the carriage. Kylas stared with owlish intensity; the two court ladies, ostensibly sympathetic, could not mask their hunger for sensation, ultimately to become the precious stuff of gossip.

Madouc turned to Queen Sollace: "Such information, Your Highness, is suited for your royal ears alone! There are secrets which should not be heard by the common folk."

"Bah!" grunted Sollace. "Lady Tryffyn and Lady Sipple are trusted intimates; they can hardly be described as 'common folk'! Kylas is a baptized Christian; she has interest in naught but the Blessed

Grail itself."

"So it may be," said Madouc. "Still, I am constrained."

"Nonsense! Proceed with your narrative!"

"I dare not, Your Highness! If you wish fully to understand my prudence, come with me, you and I together, deep into the Forest of Tantrevalles."

"Alone? Without an escort? That is insanity." Sollace pulled on the bell cord; the carriage halted and a livened groom jumped down to look through the window. "What are Your Majesty's

needs?"

"These ladies will ride for a space in one of the other carriages. Narcissa, Dansy, Kylas: be good enough to oblige me in this regard. As Madouc indicates, there may be matter here unsuited for general dissemination."

With poor grace the two ladies and Damsel Kylas moved to another carriage. Madouc quickly took the place vacated by Lady Sipple, across from Queen Sollace, and the procession once more set off up the Sfer Arct.

"Now then," said Sollace, munching a fig and paying no heed to Madouc's

move. "You may proceed. In all candour, I prefer to hear your tale in privacy. Ignore no detail!"

Madouc saw no reason to conceal any aspect of her adventures. She told the tale to the best of her recollection, and succeeded in arousing the wonderment of Queen Sollace. At the end she eyed Madouc with something like awe.

"Amazing! When half of your blood derives from Faerie, do you not feel a longing to rejoin the shee?"

Madouc shook her head. "Never. If I had remained at the shee, to eat fairy bread and drink fairy wine, then I would grow into something close to a fairy, except

that mortality would come upon me more quickly. At this time, almost all fairies have taints of human blood in their veins; so they are known as halflings. In time, so it is said, the race will mingle into the ruck and the fairies will be gone. Among the human men and women, no one will realize that their quirks and oddities come from the fairy trace. As for me, I am largely mortal, and I cannot change. So I will live and die, as will my children, and soon the flow of Faerie will be forgotten."

"Just so, and to the greater glory of the Faith!" stated Sollace. "Father Umphred tells us that the folk of Forest Trantrevalles are devils and satanic



imps, of lesser or greater venality.  
Along with heretics, pagans, atheists,  
impenitents and idolaters, all such folk  
are destined for the lowest pits of Hell!"

"I suspect that he is wrong," said  
Madouc.

"Impossible! He is learned in all phases  
of theology!"

"Other doctrines exist, and other learned  
men."

"They are all heretical, and all false!"  
declared Queen Sollace. "Logic compels  
this conviction! Listen now! Where  
would be the benefits for True Believers

if everyone were to share alike in the glories of the hereafter? That is carrying generosity too far!"

Madouc was forced to admit the logic of the remark. "Still, I have not studied the subject, and my opinions count for little."

When at last Queen Sollace had discussed the affair to her satisfaction, she halted the cortege once again, and allowed Kylas and the Ladies Tryffyn and Sipple, all somewhat disgruntled, back into the carriage. Madouc slid over to the side of the seat. Lady Tryffyn and Kylas took their old places and Lady Sipple perforce occupied Madouc's

original seat, opposite Kylas, to Madouc's great satisfaction.

Queen Sollace said: "Princess Madouc was correct in her assumptions. She spoke of certain matters which clearly are best not made public."

"It must be as Your Majesty asserts," said Lady Tryffyn with a pursed mouth. "It should be noted, however, that I, at least, am notorious for my discretion."

Lady Sipple said with dignity: "At Deep Daun Keep, where I maintain my household, we are haunted by three ghosts. They come by the dark of the moon to tell their woes. They have

entrusted me with highly intimate details, without restraint."

"So goes the world!" said Queen Sollace heavily. "None of us is wise beyond all others. Even Madouc admits to this."

Kylas spoke in her quiet, somewhat throaty voice: "I am pleased to discover that the trait of modesty is included among Princess Madouc's many virtues."

"Wrong, and wrong again," said Madouc in a bored monotone. "I have few virtues, and modesty is not one of them."

"Ha hah!" said Queen Sollace. "So it

must be, since among all others Madouc knows herself best!"

## II

While King Casmir and Prince Cassander visited the stronghold Fort Mael, Queen Sollace, with her party, rested at Ronart Cinquelon, seat of Tauberet, Duke of Moncrif.

King Casmir and Cassander inspected the facilities at Fort Mael, reviewed troops, and in general were satisfied with what they saw. They departed the fortress during the early afternoon, and by dint of hard riding reached Ronart Cinquelon at dusk.

In the morning King Casmir discovered that Madouc was included among the company, coming upon her as she was about to climb into the carriage. Casmir stopped short in surprise and displeasure. Madouc performed a polite curtsey. "Good morning, Your Majesty."

For a moment Casmir seemed on the verge of uttering a harsh command, but he turned on his heel and strode away.

Madouc smiled thoughtfully and climbed into the carriage.

The party set off up Icniel Way. The cortege now included King Casmir,

Prince Cassander, the carriage, a pair of royal equerries, an escort of six knights, and a group of four men-at-arms who rode at the rear of the column and kept themselves apart from the others.

Madouc thought these four a singular group, quite deficient in military discipline, casual and almost disrespectful in their attitudes. Odd, thought Madouc. After a few miles King Casmir became annoyed with their conduct and sent Cassander back to have a word with them, after which they rode in better order.

On the third day after leaving Ronart Cinquelon the company arrived at Cogstone Head on the Cambermouth. A

ferry propelled first in one direction then the other, by the ebb and flood of the tide, conveyed the company across the water to the northern shore. An hour later the party arrived at Avallon, the City of Tall Towers.

At the city gates the party was met by a detachment of King Audry's Elite Guards, splendid in uniforms of gray and green, with helmets of glistening silver. To the music of fifes, pipes and drums, the party from Lyonesse was escorted along a wide boulevard, through the formal gardens at the front of Falu Ffail, to the main portal. King Audry came forward to pronounce a stately welcome.



The royal party was then conducted to a set of chambers surrounding a garden courtyard in the east wing of the palace, with orange trees at the corners and a fountain at the center. Madouc's quarters were luxurious beyond any she had yet known. A heavy carpet of green plush covered the floor of her parlour; the furniture had been constructed to a light and graceful style, enamelled white and upholstered with blue and green cushions. On two of the walls hung painted representations of nymphs at play in an Arcadian landscape; on a side table a blue majolica vase displayed a bouquet of mixed flowers. Madouc found the total effect both unusual and

pleasing. In addition to the parlour the suite included a bedchamber, a bathroom with fixtures carved from pink porphyry and a dressing room with a large Byzantine mirror affixed to the wall. Shelves displayed a variety of perfumes, oils and essences.

Madouc discovered only a single disadvantage to the chambers: the fact that Kylas had been assigned quarters adjacent to her own, with a door opening into her parlour. For whatever reason, Kylas pursued her duties with full dedication, as if keeping a vigil. Wherever Madouc moved, the brilliant black gaze followed her.

Madouc finally sent Kylas on an errand. Waiting only until Kylas had disappeared from view, Madouc ran from the chambers and with all speed consonant with dignity departed the east wing.

She found herself in Falu Ffail's main gallery, which, like that of Haidion, ran the length of the palace. Arriving in the reception hail, she approached a portly young underchamberlain, proud in his gray and green livery and loose flat cap of scarlet velvet, which he wore stylishly canted to the right so that it draped over his right ear. He took favorable note of the slender maiden with the copper-gold curls and sky-blue

eyes and was pleased to inform her that neither King Aillas nor Prince Dhrun had arrived. "Prince Dhrun will be here shortly; King Aillas has been delayed and may not arrive until tomorrow."

"How so?" asked Madouc in puzzlement. "Why do they not come together?"

"It is a complicated business. Prince Dhrun arrives aboard his ship the Nementhe on which he serves as first officer. King Aillas, so it appears, has been delayed at Domreis. His young queen is eight months heavy with child, and there was some question as to whether King Aillas would come at all. But we have had late report that he is on

his way. Prince Dhrun, however, should be on hand at any moment; his vessel entered the Cambermouth this morning on the tide."

Madouc turned to look about the hall. At the far end, an archway opened into an atrium illuminated by high glass skylights. To either side stood monumental statues, ranked in a pair of opposing rows.

The underchamberlain observed the direction of Madouc's gaze. "You are looking into the Court of Dead Gods. The statues are very old."

"How is it known that these gods are

dead? Or truly dead, for that matter?"

The underchamberlain gave a whimsical shrug. "I have never gone deeply into the subject. Perhaps when gods are no longer venerated, they fade, or dissipate. The statues yonder were worshipped by the ancient Evadnioi, who preceded the Pelasgians. In Troicinet Gaea is still reckoned the Great Goddess, and in the sea near Ys is a temple dedicated to Atlante. Perhaps these gods are not dead after all. Would you like to see them more closely? I can spare a few moments, until the next party of dignitaries arrives."

"Why not! Kylas will surely not come to

seek me among the 'Dead Gods'."

The underchamberlain took Madouc into the Court of Dead Gods. "See yonder! There stands Cron the Unknowable, across from his terrible spouse Hec, the Goddess of Fate. For a game they created the difference between 'yes' and 'no'; then, once again becoming bored, they ordained the distinction between 'something' and 'nothing'. When these diversions palled, they opened their hands and through their fingers let trickle matter, time, space and light, and at last they had created enough to hold their interest."

"All very well," said Madouc. "But

where did they learn this intricate lore?"

"Aha!" said the underchamberlain wisely. "That is where the mystery begins! When theologians are asked as to the source of Cron and Hec, they pull at their beards and change the subject. It is certainly beyond my understanding. We know for a fact that only Cron and Hec are father and mother to all the rest. There you see Atlante, there Gaea; there is Fantares, there Aeris. These are the divinities of water, earth, fire and air. Apollo the Glorious is God of the Sun; Drethre the Beautiful is Goddess of the Moon. There you see Fluns, Lord of Battles; facing him is Palas, Goddess of the Harvest. Finally: Adace and Aronice



stand in opposition, as well they might! For six months of each year Adace is the God of Pain, Cruelty and Evil, while Aronice is the Goddess of Love and Kindness. At the time of the equinoxes they change roles and for the next six months, Adace is the God of Bravery, Virtue and Clemency, while Aronice is the Goddess of Spite, Hatred and Treachery. For this reason they are known as 'The Fickle Pair'."

"Ordinary folk change by the hour, or even by the minute," said Madouc. "By comparison, Adace and Aronice would seem to be steadfast. Still, I would not care to be a member of their household."

"That is an astute observation," said the underchamberlain. He inspected her once again. "Am I mistaken, or might you be the distinguished Princess Madouc of Lyonesse?"

"So I am known, at least for the moment."

The underchamberlain bowed. "You may know me as Tibalt, with the rank of esquire. I am happy to assist Your Highness! Please advise me if I may continue to be of service!"

Madouc asked: "From sheer curiosity, where is the table Cairbra an Meadhan?"

Tibalt, with a brave flourish, pointed his finger. "The portal yonder leads into the Hall of Heroes."

Madouc said: "You may conduct me to this hail, if you will."

"With pleasure."

A pair of men-at-arms, halberds at vertical rest, stood immobile by the portal; their eyes moved by not so much as a flicker at the approach of Madouc and Tibalt; the two passed unchallenged into the Hall of Heroes.

Tibalt said: "This is the oldest part of Falu Ffail. No one knows who laid these

great stones! You will have noticed that the chamber is circular and commands a diameter of thirty-three yards. And there is the Round Table: Cairbra an Meadhan!"

"So I see."

The total diameter is fourteen yards and eleven ells. The outer ring is five feet across, and is constructed of rock elm laid on oak timbers, leaving a central opening about eleven yards in diameter."

Tibalt conducted Madouc around the table. "Notice the bronze plaques: they name paladins of long past ages, and indicate their places at the table."

Madouc bent to study one of the plaques. "The characters are of archaic style, but legible. This one reads: 'Here sits Sir Gahun of Hack, fierce as the north wind and relentless in battle.'

Tibalt was impressed. "You are adept in the skill of reading! But then, that is the prerogative of a princess!"

"True enough," said Madouc. "Still, many common folk can do as well, if they apply themselves. I recommend the sleight to you; it is not so hard after the many peculiar shapes become familiar."

"Your Highness has inspired me!" declared Tibalt. "I will begin to master

this skill at once. Now then!" Tibalt pointed across the chamber. "There you see Evandig, the Throne of the Elder Kings. We stand in the presence of the mighty! It is said that once each year their ghosts gather in this hall to renew old friendships. And now what? Will you see more of this hall? It is a trifle gloomy, and used only at state occasions."

"Will it be used during the present colloquy?"

"Definitely so!"

"Where will King Casmir sit, and where King Aillas and Prince Dhrun?"

"As to this, I am ignorant; it is in the province of the seneschal and the heralds. Will you see any more?"

"No, thank you."

Tibalt led Madouc back through the portai and into the Court of Dead Gods. From the reception chamber came the sound of many voices.

Tibalt spoke in agitation: "Excuse me, please; I am absent from my post! Someone has arrived and I would suspect it to be Prince Dhrun with his escort!"

Tibalt ran off with Madouc following

close behind. She entered the reception hall to discover Prince Dhrun and three Troice dignitaries in the company of King Audry, along with the Princes Dorcas, Whemus and Jaswyn, and the two princesses, Cloire and Mahaeve. Madouc sidled through the press of courtiers, hoping to approach Dhrun, but without success; he and his company were led away by King Audry.

Madouc slowly returned to her own rooms. She found Kylas sitting stonily in the parlour.

Kylas spoke in clipped tones: "When I returned from your errand, you were gone. Where did you go?"



"That is beside the point," said Madouc.  
"You must not trouble yourself with details of this nature."

"It is my duty to attend you," said Kylas stubbornly.

"When I require your assistance, I will notify you. As for now, you may retire to your own quarters."

Kylas rose to her feet. "I will be back presently. A maid has been assigned to your service and will help you dress for the evening banquet; the queen has suggested that I help you select a suitable gown from your wardrobe."

"That is nonsense," said Madouc. "I need no advice. Do not return until I summon you."

Kylas stalked from the room.

Madouc dressed early, and after only a moment's indecision chose the gown of Black Rose velvet. She left early and alone for the Great Hall, where she hoped to find Dhrun before the start of the banquet. Dhrun was not on hand. Prince Jaswyn, Audry's third son, a dark-haired youth fifteen years old, came forward and escorted her to a place at the table beside his own, with Prince Raven of Pomperol to her other side.

Dhrun at last appeared, and was conducted to a seat across the table and six places to the side. He had changed from his travel garments to an indigo blue doublet and white shirt—a simple costume which nicely set off his clear complexion and neat cap of dark blond hair. He noticed Madouc and waved his hand, but thereafter was held close in conversation by the Princess Cloire; and in the intervals when she relaxed her attention, by Queen Linnet of Pomperol.

The banquet proceeded, course by course; Madouc presently stopped eating or even tasting from the dishes tendered by the stewards. The four goblets before her contained two sorts of red wine, a

soft white wine and a tart green wine; they were filled and refilled every time Madouc sipped, and she soon desisted, lest her head start to spin. Prince Jaswyn was an entertaining dinner companion, as was Prince Raven, youngest son to King Kestrel and brother to the egregious Bittern, who had not come to Avallon by reason of a rheum and an asthma. On several occasions Madouc discovered Queen Sollace's frosty gaze fixed upon her, but pretended not to notice.

King Audry at last rose to his feet, signalling the end of the banquet. Soft music of lutes and rebecs at once began to issue from the adjacent ballroom.

Madouc made hurried excuses to Prince Jaswyn and Prince Raven, slipped from her chair and ran to circle the table, so that she might approach Dhrun. She was first impeded by Prince Whemus, who wished to compliment her and to initiate a conversation. As quickly and politely as possible, Madouc detached herself, but now, when she looked, Dhrun was nowhere to be seen. Ah, there he was, on the other side of the table! Madouc retraced her steps, only to meet Kylas, who brought an urgent message, which she transmitted with poorly suppressed satisfaction. "Queen Sollace finds your gown unsatisfactory."

"She is mistaken! You may tell her that I

am quite satisfied with it."

"It is the queen who is not satisfied. She thinks the gown unsuitable for a person of your years and lack of experience. She wishes that you and I repair to your chambers, where I am to help you select a gown more modest and youthful. Come; we must go at once."

Madouc spoke tersely: "I regret that the queen is displeased, but I am sure that you have misunderstood her instructions. She would hardly expect me to change clothes now. Excuse me, and do not approach me again." Madouc tried to sidle past, but Kylas stood in her way. "You have heard the queen's instruc

tions! There has been no mistake!"

Madouc restrained her vexation with an effort. "Explain to the queen that it would be most inconvenient for me to change clothes now, especially as this gown is quite suitable."

"Not altogether."

"In any event, stand aside; there is someone with whom I wish to speak!"

"Who might it be?"

"Really, Kylas! Your question serves no purpose!" Madouc dodged past, only to discover that Dhrun again was lost in the

slow circulation of grandees and courtiers.

Madouc went to the side of the chamber. She looked right and left, searching from individual to individual. Overhead a thousand candle flames in five candelabra enriched a thousand colors in the flux of fabric below: rose-madder and saffron; steel-blue and moss-green; lemon-white, maroon, umber and rose-pink; also the twinkle of silver and the glow of gold, and everywhere the glitter of jewels. Faces swam in the candlelight like wan jellyfish in a luminous tide: faces of all kinds, each a symbol for the soul it concealed! But none, either to right or to left, was the face of Dhrun!



A voice spoke close by her ear. "Why do you avoid me so? Am I now your hated enemy?"

Madouc whirled to find Dhrun standing beside her. "Dhrun!" She barely restrained herself from an over-impulsive act. "I have been looking everywhere for you! To no effect; wherever I went, you were gone; I was chasing a shadow!"

"You have found me at last, and I have found you, and I am amazed!"

Madouc looked up at him, smiling in sheer happiness. "Tell me why!"

"You know why! If I told you more, I would be embarrassed!"

"Tell me anyway."

"Very well. Long ago I knew that you would become beautiful - but I did not think it would happen so soon."

Madouc laughed quietly. "Are you embarrassed?" Dhrun also laughed.

"You do not seem offended, or disturbed."

"Then I will say something and perhaps I will be embarrassed."

Dhrun took her two hands. "I will listen,

and I promise you I will take no offense."

Madouc half-whispered: "I am happy to hear what you said, since I care for no opinion other than yours."

Dhrun spoke impulsively: "If I dared, I would kiss you!"

Shyness overtook Madouc. "Not now! Every one would see!"

"True! But what of that?"

Madouc squeezed his hands. "Listen now! I have something important to tell you, and you must heed me very

carefully."

"You have all my attention!"

Someone stood close by Madouc's shoulder. Madouc looked around and into Kylas' inquisitive black eyes.

Kylas asked: "Are you coming to change your garments, as Her Highness wishes?"

"Not just now," said Madouc. "You may explain to Her Highness that Prince Dhrun and I are deep in consultation and he would think me eccentric if I suddenly ran off to change clothes." She led Dhrun away, leaving Kylas staring

after her.

Madouc said: "Kylas is something of a trial. She watches my every move and reports to the queen, for what purpose I cannot imagine, since the queen has no notion of what I am about to tell you."

"Tell me, then! What is so important?"

"Your life! I could not bear that you should lose it!"

"I feel much the same. Say on."

"Do you know of Persilian the Magic Mirror?"

"I have heard the name from my father."

King Audry approached the two and halted. He looked Madouc up and down. "Who is this bright-haired little slyph? I noticed her at the table, deep in conversation with Prince Jaswyn."

"Your Highness, allow me to introduce Princess Madouc of Lyonesse."

King Audry raised his eyebrows and tugged at his fine mustache. "Can this be the creature of whom we have heard such remarkable tales? I am astonished!"

Madouc said politely: "The tales have surely been exaggerated, Your Highness."

"All of them?"

"At times, perhaps, my conduct has lacked full meekness and sweet reason; on this account my reputation has suffered."

King Audry shook his head and stroked his beard. "A sad situation, to be sure! But there is still time for redemption!"

Madouc said demurely: "Your Majesty has encouraged me to hope; I will not give way to despair!"

"It would be a pity if you did!" declared King Audry. "Let us move into the ballroom, where the dancing will soon

begin. What, may I ask, are your favorite steps?"

"I have none, Your Highness! I have never troubled to learn and I do not know one from the other."

"Surely you can step the pavane?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"It is one of my own favorites, being at once grave, yet debonair, and susceptible to a thousand pretty intricacies, and that shall be the first of the dances."

Prince Jaswyn, standing by, bowed



before Madouc. "May I have the honour of pacing the pavane with Your Highness?"

Madouc turned a quick sad glance toward Dhrun, then said: "I will be pleased, Prince Jaswyn."

The pavane came to an end. Prince Jaswyn conducted Madouc to the side of the room. She looked about for Dhrun; as before, he was not immediately visible, and Madouc clicked her tongue in exasperation. Why could he not remain in place? Did he not recognize the urgency of what she must tell him? Madouc looked in all directions, trying to see over the heads of the gallants and

past the gowns of their ladies. At last she discovered Dhrun, in the company of Prince Cassander; the two were just entering the chamber. Madouc made hasty excuses to Prince Jaswyn. Marching across the room, she approached the two princes.

Cassander saw her come without pleasure. His greeting was lofty. "Well then, Madouc! I should think that you would be in your element! Now is your chance to mingle with the society of Avallon!"

"I have already done so."

"Then why are you not dancing, and

gamboling about, and impressing the young folk with your wit?"

"I might ask the same of you."

Cassander responded curtly. "Tonight such entertainment fails to match my mood, nor that of Prince Dhrun. Such being the case-"

Madouc looked at Dhrun. "You too are satiated and world-weary?"

"Perhaps not to the level described by Prince Cassander," said Dhrun, grinning.

Cassander frowned. He told Madouc: "Yonder stands Prince Raven of

Pomperol. Why do you not discuss your theories with him?"

"Not just now. I also feel somewhat blasé. Where did you two go to avoid the demands of society?"

Cassander said coldly: "We went elsewhere, to enjoy a few moments of quiet."

"Cassander, you are resourceful! In revelry of this scale, where does one find privacy?"

"Here, there, one place or another," said Cassander. "It is all beside the point."

"Still, I am curious."

Dhrun said: "Prince Cassander wished to visit the Hall of Heroes, so that he might honour an old tradition."

"So now: the truth emerges!" said Madouc. "Cassander is not so nonchalant as he pretends. What tradition did Cassander feel obliged to honour?"

Cassander spoke peevishly: "It is only a whim, no more! Princes of royal blood who sit even a moment on the throne Evandig are assured of a long life and a fortunate reign-such is the legend."

"That is a very obscure legend," said Madouc. "Dhrun, did you honour this tradition as well?"

Dhrun gave an uncomfortable laugh. "Prince Cassander insisted that I share these benefits with him."

"That was kind of Prince Cassander! And you sat at the Round Table as well?"

"For a moment or two."

Madouc heaved a sigh. "Well then, now that you have been soothed by the privacy, do you remember that you promised to dance with me?"

Dhrun looked puzzled for only an instant, then said: "So I did! Prince Cassander, my excuses."

Cassander gave his head a crisp nod. "Dance away!"

Madouc took Dhrun not to the dance floor but to the shadows at the side of the hall. "Think now," she said. "When you sat on the throne, did you speak?"

"Only to fulfill the terms of the tradition, as Cassander explained it to me. When he sat on the throne he uttered an order, that I should step forward a pace. I did the same in my turn."

Madouc gave a fateful nod. "So now you must fear for your life. You may die at any instant."

"How so?"

"I have been trying to tell you of Persilian's prophecy. It guides every hour of your life!"

"What is the prophecy?"

"It goes to the effect that the first-born son of the Princess Suldrun-that is to say, you-will take his rightful place at Cairbra an Meadhan and rule from the throne Evandig before his death. You have now fulfilled the prophecy! You



have sat at the table and you have given an order while sitting on Evandig, and now Casmir will put his assassins to work. You may be killed this very night!"

Dhrun was silent for several moments. "I thought Cassander's conduct somewhat odd! Is he aware of the prophecy?"

"That is hard to guess. He is vain and foolish, but not altogether unkind. Still, he would obey King Casmir's orders, no matter where they led."

"Even to murder?"

"He would obey orders. But he need not

do so, since King Casmir brought others with all the needful skills."

"It is a chilling thought! I will be on my guard! Three good knights of Troicinet are with me and they shall stay close by my side."

"When does your father arrive?"

"Tomorrow, or so I believe. I will be glad to see him!"

"I as well."

Dhrun looked down into Madouc's face. He bent his head and kissed her forehead. "You did your best to spare

me this peril. I thank you, my dear Madouc! You are as clever as you are pretty!"

"This is a most successful gown," said Madouc. "The color is called Black Rose and by some freak it goes nicely with my hair. The style also seems to enhance what I suppose I must call my posture. I wonder, I wonder!"

"What do you wonder?"

"You remember King Throbius, of course."

"I remember him well. On the whole he was benign, if a trifle foolish."

"Just so. For certain reasons, he laid a glamour upon me, which caused a great excitement and, to tell the truth, frightened me with its awful power. To relieve myself of the force, I was instructed to pull at my right ear with fingers of my left hand. Now I wonder if I pulled hard enough!"

"Hmm," said Dhrun. "It is difficult to say."

"I could pull again, for the sake of honesty and reassurance. Still, if I instantly became a ragtag starveling with my beautiful gown hanging limp, I would feel distress-especially if you drew away from me and took back all your

compliments."

"It might be best to let sleeping dogs lie," said Dhrun. "Still, I suspect that what we have here is you, in part and in full."

"Once and for all I will make sure. That is the honourable course~Are you watching?"

"Very carefully."

"Be prepared for the worst!" Madouc gave her right ear a tug with the fingers of her left hand. "Do you notice a change?"

"Not a whit."

"That is a relief. Let us go over yonder and sit on the couch and, if nothing else, I will tell you of my adventures in the Forest of Tantrevalles."

### III

The night passed without alarm or incident. The sun rose tangerine red in the east, and the day began. Madouc awoke early and lay for a few moments in her bed thinking. Then, abruptly, she jumped to the floor, summoned her maid, bathed in the pink porphyry tub, and dressed in a frock of soft blue linen with

a white collar. The maid brushed her hair until the copper ringlets became disciplined and hung in shining curls, and were tied with a blue ribbon.

A knock sounded at the door. Madouc cocked her head to listen, then gave quick instructions to the maid. The knock sounded again, sharp and peremptory. The maid opened the door a slit, to find two black eyes gleaming at her from a sallow long-nosed face. The maid called out: "Have you no respect for Her Highness? The princess receives no one so early! Go away!"

She closed the door upon muffled expostulations: "It is I, Damsel Kylas! I

am a person of rank! Open the door that I may enter!"

Receiving no response, Kylas marched off to her own chambers, where she tried the door giving into Madouc's parlour, only to discover that the door was locked.

Kylas knocked, and called out: "Open, if you please! It is I, Kylas!"

Instead of complying, Madouc was away: out the other door, to the end of the garden courtyard, into the east gallery and out of sight.

Kylas knocked again. "Open at once! I



bring a message from Queen Sollace!"

The maid at last unlatched the door;  
Kylas stormed into the parlour.

"Madouc? Princess Madouc!" She went into the bedchamber, looking right and left, then into the dressing room. Finding no trace of her quarry, she called toward the bathroom:

"Princess Madouc! Are you within? Her Majesty insists that you attend on her at once, that she may instruct you for the day! Princess Madouc?" Kylas looked into the bathroom, then turned angrily upon the maid. "Where is the princess?"

"She has already gone out, your

ladyship."

"I can see that for myself. But where?"

"As to that, I cannot say."

Kylas gave a croak of annoyance and rushed away.

Madouc had taken herself to the Morning Saloon, as recommended the night before by Prince Jaswyn. This was a large room, pleasant and airy, with sunlight streaming through tall glass windows. A buffet, running the length of the room, supported a hundred dishes, platters, bowls and trenchers, offering foods of many sorts.

Madouc found King Audry and Prince Jaswyn already on hand, taking their breakfast together. Prince Jaswyn gallantly leapt to his feet and escorted Madouc to a place at his table.

"Breakfast is informal," said King Audry. "You may serve yourself or command the stewards, as you wish. I would not overlook either the ortolans or the woodcock; both are prime. I had an order out for hare and boar, but my huntsmen were unlucky, and today we must do without, nor will we eat venison, which, after all, is somewhat rich for breakfast, especially in a ragout. Please do not think the worse for me for my paltry board; I am sure you are fed

more adequately at Haidion."

"I usually find enough to eat, one way or another," said Madouc. "I am not likely to make complaints, unless the porridge is burned."

"The last cook to burn the porridge was flogged," said King Audry. "Since then, we have had no more difficulties."

Madouc walked along the buffet, and served herself four plump ortolans, an omelet of morels and parsley, scones with butter and a bowl of strawberries and cream.

"Whit? No fish?" cried King Audry

aghast. "It is our fame and our pride! Steward! Bring the princess some salmon in wine sauce with new peas, and also a good taste of the lobster in saffron cream; also-why not?-a dozen each of the cockles and winkles, and do not spare the garlic butter."

Madouc looked dubiously at the plates set in front of her. "I fear that I would grow very fat indeed were I to dine with you regularly!"

"It is a delightful risk to take," said King Audry. He turned at the approach of an official. "Well then, Evian: what is your news?"

"The Flor Velas has been sighted in the Cambermouth, Your Majesty. King Aillas will be on hand shortly, unless he is set aback by an offshore wind."

"How blows the wind at this time?"

"It veers, Your Majesty, from north to northwesterly, with a gust now and then from the west. The weathercocks are faithless."

"That is not a favoring wind," said King Audry. "Still we must start our colloquy by the schedule; timely starts make for happy voyages. Am I not right, Princess?"

"That is my own opinion, Your Majesty. The ortolans are delicious."

"Clever girl! Ah well, I had hoped that King Aillas would be present at the opening ceremonies, but we shall not delay, and he will miss nothing of substance, since we must proceed through a round or two of encomiums, salutes, noble breast-beating, laudatory allusions and the like. Until King Aillas arrives, Prince Dhrun shall listen with the ears of Troicinet, and speak the official Troice eulogies. He is over-young for such service, but it will be good training for him."

Dhrun, with his three companions, came

into the Morning Saloon. They approached King Audry's table. "Good morning, Your Highness," said Dhrun. "Good morning to you, Prince Jaswyn, and to you as well, Princess."

"No less to you," said King Audry. "Your father's ship has been sighted in the Cambermouth and he will be on hand shortly-certainly before the day is out."

"That is good news."

"Meanwhile, the colloquy begins on schedule! Until King Aillas arrives, you must act in his stead. Make ready, therefore, to deliver a resonant and inspirational oration!"



"That is bad news!"

King Audry chuckled. "The acts of kingship are not all equally pleasurable."

"I suspect this already, Your Highness, from observing my father."

"Jaswyn has surely arrived at the same conclusion," said King Audry. "Am I right, Jaswyn?"

"Absolutely, sir."

King Audry gave a placid nod and returned to Dhrun. "I keep you from your breakfast. Fortify yourself well!"

Madouc called out: "King Audry recommends the ortolans and the woodcock. He also insisted that I eat cockles and winkles by the dozen."

"I will heed your advice, as always," said Dhrun. He and his comrades went off to the buffet. A moment later Prince Cassander entered the refectory, with his friend Sir Camrols. Cassander halted and surveyed the room, then, approaching King Audry, paid his respects. "King Casmir and Queen Sollace are taking breakfast in their chambers; they will appear at the Hall of Heroes at the appointed time."

"The time is not far off," said King

Audry. "The morning has gone apace!"

Cassander turned to Madouc. "Queen Sollace wishes you to present yourself before her at once. I will warn you that she is

not pleased with your flighty conduct, which verges upon rank insubordination."

"The queen must postpone her censure, or-even better-put it aside altogether," said Madouc. "I am now taking breakfast with King Audry and Prince Jaswyn; it would be an act of unutterable rudeness if I were to jump up and depart. Further, Cassander, your own manners leave

much to be desired. In the first place-"

Cassander, noting King Audry's amusement, became angry. "Enough; in fact, more than enough! In regard to manners, it is you, not I, who will be sent packing back to Haidion before the hour is out."

"Impossible!" said Madouc. "King Audry has insisted that I be present at the colloquy, for my better education! I dare not disobey him!"

"Naturally not," said King Audry in a genial voice. "Come now, Prince Cassander, be gentle and easy, I beg of you! The world is not coming to an end

because of Madouc's merry nature! Let her enjoy herself without reproach."

Cassander bowed, coldly urbane. "It shall be as Your Majesty wishes."

Cassander and Sir Camrols turned away and served themselves from the buffet.

Half an hour passed. Sir Tramador, High Chamberlain at Falu Ffail, appeared and spoke quietly to King Audry, who sighed and rose to his feet. "In truth, I far prefer the Morning Saloon to the Hall of Heroes and, by the same token, the buffet to the Cairbra an Meadhan!"

Madouc suggested: "Why not hold the colloquy here instead of there? Whoever

became bored with the speeches could devour an ortolan for diversion."

"The concept is not inherently bad," said King Audry. "However, the schedule is firmly cast, and cannot be altered without extreme confusion. Prince Dhrun, are you coming?"

"I am ready, Your Majesty."

In the corridor Dhrun waited for Madouc. "I have become a person of importance-at least until my father arrives. I may be called upon to address the company. No one will listen, of course, which is just as well, since I have nothing to say."

"It is simple. You must wish everyone a long reign and hope that the Goths invade elsewhere."

"That should suffice. Also, it is possible my father will arrive before I am required to speak, whereupon I shall gratefully relinquish my place at the table."

Madouc stopped short. Dhrun looked at her in wonder. "What disturbs you now?"

"Last night, so you told me, you sat at the Round Table."

"So! did."

"But in all likelihood you did not sit in what will today be your 'rightful place'! The prophecy is not yet satisfied! I will make sure that King Casmir is aware of this!"

Dhrun thought a moment. "It makes no great difference, since I am now about to take this 'rightful place'."

"But you must not! It is as much as your life is worth!"

Dhrun spoke in a hollow voice: "I cannot refuse with honour!"

King Audry looked over his shoulder. "Come along the two of you! There is no



time for secrets! The colloquy is about to begin!"

"Yes, Your Highness," said Dhrun. Madouc said nothing.

The two entered the Hall of Heroes, now illuminated by four iron candelabra suspended by iron chains over the Round Table. At each place a silver plate overlay the ancient bronze plaque set into the wood.

Around the Hall of Heroes stood the kings and queens of the Elder Isles, a fair number of princes and princesses and notables of high degree. King Audry mounted the low dais on which rested

the throne Evandig. He addressed the company:

"At last we are here, in full force, the sovereigns of all the Elder Isles! We are come perhaps for many reasons, that we may explain our dearest hopes and aspirations; also, that each may extend to the others the fruits of his particular wisdom! It is truly a notable occasion, one which long will be memorialized by the historians! Reflect, each and every one! It has been many a long year since our land has known so full a convocation! Each realm is represented, save only Skaghane, where the folk still hold aloof from association. I point out as well that King Aillas is not yet on

hand, but Prince Dhrun will speak with the voice of Troicinet, until such time as his father the king arrives.

"In regard to this colloquy and its happy portents, we must acknowledge the initiative of King Casmir! It is he who put forward the concept, asserting the need for broad and easy contact between the rulers of the separate states. I agree in all respects! The time is ripe for frank discussions, that we may define without hesitation our points at difference, and each, when necessary, make the compromises and adjustments decreed by simple fairness and justice.

"With so much said-and with so much

more to be said-let us seat ourselves at the Cairbra an Meadhan. Heralds will conduct each to his place, which is marked by a silver plate indited in good round characters. Other persons will sit upon the couches arranged around the wall."

King Audry stepped down from the dais and went to the Round Table, as did the other sovereigns and their counsellors. Heralds in gray and green livery guided the dignitaries to their places, as indicated by the silver plates. One of the heralds came so to conduct Dhrun, but could not find the proper silver plate. He circled the table reading the names, but found none properly inscribed.

At one seat the silver plate was missing, and only the ancient bronze plaque into the black wood remained. The herald stopped at this place, where no one sat, read the bronze plaque, leaned forward incredulously and read again. He went to summon King Audry and led him to the empty place.

King Audry read, then read again. By this time the attention of everyone in the chamber was fixed upon him. Slowly he straightened, and spoke to the room at large. "Sirs and ladies, the Cairbra an Meadhan is imbued with magic, and it has been at work. There is now no plate of silver at this place; it has disappeared. The bronze which over the

centuries marked this place now reads: 'HERE IS THE PLACE OF DHRUN, WHERE IN HIS GOOD AND FULL TIME HE SHALL SIT'."

Silence held the hall. King Audry spoke on. "I cannot guess the meaning of this magic, nor the exact thrust of the words. A single point is clear: the table recognizes the presence of Prince Dhrun and has indicated his proper place! Prince Dhrun, you may sit."

Dhrun came forward, step by reluctant step. Behind the chair he halted and spoke to King Audry: "Sire, today I prefer not to sit! I will stand, if I may."

King Audrey spoke in exasperation:  
"You must sit! We are all waiting for you to take your rightful place."

"Sire, I am not prepared to join your august deliberations at this time. It is more proper that I stand, pending the arrival of my father."

King Casmir spoke in a voice which he tried to hold even but which grated with harshness. "Come! Let us not waste any more time! Sit, Prince Dhrun! This is what we expect of you!"

"Quite so," said King Audry. "We do not wish to deliberate while staring at an empty seat. You must sit."

Madouc could no longer restrain herself. She called out: "Dhrun, do not sit! Today I will sit in your stead, and be your deputy!" She ran forward, and slipped into the place marked in Dhrun's name by the bronze plaque. Dhrun stood close behind the chair. He spoke to King Audry:

"Your Majesty, so it shall be, by my choosing! Today Princess Madouc shall be my deputy and sit in my place, and, if necessary, speak with my voice. The formalities are thereby served, and the colloquy may properly begin."

King Audry stood bewildered. "This is strange conduct! I fail to understand



what is going on!"

King Casmir roared: "It is absurd! Maclouc, get yourself hence, and quickly, or know my full and awful displeasure!"

"No, Your Majesty. I will sit here. Today is not the proper time for Dhrun to occupy his rightful place at Cairbra an Meadhan."

King Casmir turned in a cold fury to King Audry: "Your Majesty, I urge that you bring your footmen and remove this foolish maiden from the chair, so that Prince Dhrun may take his place! Otherwise, the colloquy cannot proceed

with dignity!"

King Audry spoke in a troubled voice:  
"Madouc, is this one of your famous  
caprices?"

"Your Majesty, I assure you to the  
contrary! I sit here only so that Prince  
Dhrun need not occupy this place today!"

"But Madouc! Notice the bronze plaque!  
It states that here is Dhrun's place!"

"In his good and full time"! But not  
today!"

King Audry threw his arms out in a  
gesture of defeat. "I see no great harm in

the situation. The princess sits in the place by the will of Prince Dhrun."

King Casmir spoke again. "Madouc, once more I bid you depart the place of Prince Dhrun, that he may be seated."

King Audry looked around the table. Some faces were drawn into lines of displeasure, others were amused, others seemed to care little one way or another. He turned to King Casmir: "Your Majesty, I tend to the opinion that no harm can be done by allowing the Princess Madouc to sit as she wishes."

King Casmir said: "With your permission, I will deal with the matter

myself. Cassander, be good enough to escort Madouc to her chambers. If necessary, ask Sir Camrols for assistance."

With a limpid gaze Madouc watched the approach of Cassander and the stalwart Sir Camrols of Corton Banwald. She made a small gesture and a hissing sound; Sir Camrols leapt high into the air, where he seemed to hang suspended a moment, his feet twisting rapidly one about the other. He alighted on his hands and knees, where he remained, staring at Madouc in bewilderment. Madouc looked at Cassander, and hissed again, as softly as before. Cassander performed a strange double-jointed jump, as if in

two directions at once, and fell sprawling, to roll over and over.

Dhrun said: "Prince Cassander and Sir Camrols have chosen to entertain us with their gymnastic feats, rather than molest the princess; I applaud their good judgment and we should let the matter end here."

"I am of this opinion," said King Audry. "The princess evidently has good reason for her apparent caprice. Perhaps it will ultimately be made known to us; am I right, Princess?"

"It is certainly possible, Your Majesty."

King Casmir spoke again: "It is a farce! Here we sit dawdling, the sovereigns of important realms, while this insolent tippet monopolizes our attention!"

"It need not be," said Dhrun reasonably. "Let the business of the colloquy proceed!"

King Casmir pounded the table with his fist. "I am offended and outraged! I will not participate in the business until Prince Dhrun takes his rightful place!"

Madouc said in a clear voice: "I see that I must explain my action and the reasons for King Casmir's outrage. Perhaps it is better, after all, that the facts be known.

Listen then and I will tell you the information which came to me from my mother.

"Long ago King Casmir heard a prophecy from Persilian the Magic Mirror. He was told that the first-born son of Princess Suldrun would sit his rightful place at Cairbra an Meadhan and rule from the throne Evandig before his death. If this were so, King Casmir would never fulfill his yearning to conquer far and wide, and to rule the Elder Isles!

"King Casmir never knew the name of Suldrun's first and only son, and he lived in a state of anxiety. Only recently the

priest Umphred revealed the truth to King Casmir and put the name 'Dhrun' to Suldrun's son. Ever since Casmir has been scheming for a means to void the prophecy.

"For this reason he called for a colloquy here at Falu Ffail. He cares nothing for amity or peace; he intended only that Dhrun should fulfill the prophecy, so that Dhrun might then be murdered."

"Last night Prince Cassander persuaded Dhrun to sit on the throne Evandig and utter an order. Today Dhrun need only take his place at the Round Table to satisfy the terms of the prophecy; then he might safely be murdered, perhaps this



very night. An arrow from the hedge or a knife from the shadows, and Dhrun is dead! Who would do the deed? There were four who rode north with us; I dare not call them villains and murderers for fear that I might do them a wrong, but they were neither knights nor soldiers."

"Now everyone knows what I know and my reasons for denying Dhrun his place. Judge for yourselves if they are caprice; then let the colloquy proceed."

Silence held the Hall of Heroes.

At last King Audry said uneasily: "The colloquy is both shocked and somewhat addled by your revelations. We have

heard a most unusual set of charges, which regretfully ring with the clear tone of authenticity. Still, King Casmir perhaps can refute these charges. What, then, do you say, Casmir of Lyonesse?"

"I say that this sly little whelp lies from her teeth, inward and outward, in all directions, with a vile contempt for truth, and an even viler relish for the taste of pure turpitude! Upon our return to Lyonesse Town, she will be instructed at length in the virtues of veracity."

Madouc gave a jeering laugh. "Do you think me insane? I am not returning to Lyonesse Town!"

"I think you insane indeed," said Casmir carefully. "Your tales are the ravings of lunacy! I know nothing of Persilian the Magic Mirror, nor yet his prophecy!"

A new voice spoke. "Casmir, you lie, and you are the liar!" King Aillas came slowly into the Hall of Heroes. "I myself, with my own hands, took Persilian the Magic Mirror from your secret place and buried it under the lime tree in Suldrun's garden. My only new knowledge is that concerning the priest Umphred, who had already caused Suldrun untold woe. Someday there shall be an accounting with Umphred the priest."

King Casmir sat in silence, face flushed. King Audry said: "I had hoped that this colloquy would induce a new sense of fellowship among the kings of the Elder Isles, and perhaps a reconciliation of all our old grievances, so that we could reduce our armies and abandon our forts and send our yeomen home, to till the soil for the greater prosperity of all. Perhaps I am idealistic in this hope."

"Not altogether," said Aillas. "I will frankly admit that I despise Casmir the man. I can never forget nor forgive his acts of cruelty. Still, I must deal with King Casmir of Lyonesse, and I will do so politely if it will further my policy. I will reiterate it here and now, since it is

simple and all should understand it. We will not allow a strong aggressive country to attack a passive peaceful country. Explicitly, should Dahaut marshal a great force and attack Lyonesse, we would fight instantly on the side of Lyonesse. If Lyonesse foolishly chose to invade Dahaut, our forces would instantly march against Lyonesse. So long as peace reigns, we will uphold the peace. That is our national policy."

King Kestrel of Pomperol said skeptically: "All very well! Still, you took South Ulfiand and then North Ulfiand by conquest!"

"Not so! I am rightful King of South Ulfiand through the laws of descent. The kingship of North Ulfiand was fixed upon me by King Gax, as he lay dying, that I might repel the Ska. This I did, and the Ulfiands are now free of their ancient fears!"

King Audry said dubiously: "You hold lands in my western marches, and refuse to render them to me!"

"I conquered the fortress Poëlitetz from the Ska, which you could not do, and I hold it now because it forms the natural boundary between our countries. Poëlitetz indirectly serves to guard Dahaut itself."

"Hmf," said King Audry. "I will not argue the point here; it is more or less a trivial concern. Let us work around the table, taking the opinions of each participant in turn."

Each notable at the table had his say, for the most part pronouncing cautious amicability. At last it came to the place of Dhrun. Madouc cried out: "Since I sit as proxy of Prince Dhrun, I will in his name endorse the policies of King Aillas. Speaking for myself, Princess Madouc of Lyonesse, I decry the-"

King Casmir roared in sudden fury: "Madouc, be silent! From this moment henceforth you are no longer princess at

Haidion, or anywhere else! You are the nameless whelp of some prurient halfling and a hedgerow vagabond, without pedigree or known parentage! As such, you have no personal voice at this table of notables; be silent!"

King Audry cleared his throat. "The point raised by King Casmir is well taken, even though his terms were immoderate. I rule that the maiden Madouc may no longer speak in her own voice at this colloquy, no matter how entertaining her observations."

"Very well, Your Highness!" said Madouc. "I will say no more."



King Casmir spoke in a heavy voice: "I see no point in pro longing this discussion, certainly not under conditions as they now exist."

King Audry said unhappily: "Today we have heard some divergent points of view, and indeed not a few sparks of contention! But perhaps these sores can be soothed and our differences reconciled at a later session-perhaps at the end of the after noon, or even tomorrow. At this time, we shall have ordered our dispositions and resolved on the concessions which we all will choose to make, for the general weal."

'Concessions'?" demanded burly King

Dartweg of Godelia. "I have no concessions to make. To the contrary! I want Audry to chastise his Wardens of the March! We have no goodly forests in Godelia, and when our huntsmen venture into Dahaut to track down a fine stag, they are set upon by the damnable Daut patrols! There must be a cessation to this boorish practice!"

"That is quite unreasonable," said King Audry coldly. "I make a far more urgent complaint against you: to wit, your support of the Wysrod rebels, who give us no surcease!"

"They are good Celts," declared King Dartweg. "They are deserving of land,

and Wysrod is their choice. Every honest man should lend his hand to help them. It is shameful that you, King Audry, bring this case out into the open!"

King Audry spoke angrily: "My attempt to bring wise men together for a feast of logic and a banquet of reason has lured a number of lackwits and mooncalfs into our august presence, though protocol forbids me the naming of names! I have lost hope, faith and patience and I hereby declare the colloquy terminated."

## IV

The dignitaries and their ladies who had assembled in the Hall of Heroes filed

slowly out: through the Court of Dead Gods, into the reception hall, where, with many a glance to right and left, they gathered in uncertain groups to discuss the morning's events in guarded voices. When the ladies spoke, they tended to focus their attention upon Madouc. Her behavior was analyzed from a dozen directions; terms such as 'brave', 'stubborn', 'theatrical', 'vain', 'madcap', 'intractable' were all used, as well as the word 'precocious'. While no one could exactly define the manner in which the word applied, all were in tacit accord that the word was appropriate.

As for Madouc herself, she went to sit unobtrusively to the side of the reception

hall, in the company of Prince Jaswyn. For a time the two sat in silence, with Madouc gloomily wondering what to do with herself next.

Prince Jaswyn presently found his voice and put a tentative question, in regard to the mystery surrounding her birth. "Your mother is truly a fairy?"

"Yes. She is Twisk of the Blue Hair."

"Do you love her, and does she love you?"

Madouc shrugged. "The word means something different to a fairy than it does to you - or to me."

"I never noticed before, or thought to wonder, but now, when I look at you, the fairy phase is plain to see, as well as a certain jaunty carelessness which could only come from Faerie."

Madouc smiled a wan smile, and looked off across the room to where Casmir stood talking with King Dartweg of Godelia. "At the moment I feel anything but careless, and far from jaunty. My fairy blood runs thin; I have lived too long away from the shee, among human men and women."

"And your father: is he man or fairy?"

"His name is Sir Pellinore: so he spoke

it to my mother, but both were in a fanciful mood. I have learned that 'Sir Pellinore' is a creature of fable-a wandering knight who slays dragons, punishes caitiff knights by the dozen, and rescues beautiful maidens from horrid enchantments. He also plays the lute and sings sad songs, and speaks the language of the flowers."

"And this brummagem Sir Pellinore beguiled your mother with false entitlements!"

"No," said Madouc. "This is not at all the way of it. He spoke in a mood of romance, and never suspected that I might some day wish to find him."

Looking across the hall, Madouc noticed the approach of Damsel Kylas. "What do they want of me now?"

Prince Jaswyn chuckled. "I am surprised that they so much as recognize your existence."

"They will not forget me so soon," said Madouc.

Kylas came to a halt and studied Madouc with care. After a moment she spoke. "Strange things are being said" about you."

Madouc replied in a toneless voice. "I am not interested. If that is all you came



to tell me, you may go."

Kylas ignored the remark. "I bring word from the queen. She commands that you make ready for departure. We will be leaving shortly. You are to go to your chambers at once."

Madouc laughed. "I am no longer a princess of Lyonesse. I have no place in the queen's company."

"Nevertheless, you have heard the queen's command. I will conduct you."

"No need. I am not returning to Haidion."

Kylas stared with mouth agape. "Do you defy the queen's will, stark and outright?"

"Call it whatever you like."

Kylas swung about and departed. A moment later, Madouc saw Queen Sollace march heavily to where King Casmir stood with King Dartweg. The queen spoke, fluttering her white fingers toward Madouc. King Casmir turned a single glance across the chamber; the impact of his eyes caused Madouc's stomach to knot. Casmir spoke a few terse words to Queen Sollace, then continued his conversation with King Dartweg.

Someone had come to stand by Madouc's side. She looked up, to discover Dhrun. He bowed before her with full formality. "If Prince Jaswyn permits my intrusion, I would invite you to walk with me in the gardens for a period."

Madouc looked to Prince Jaswyn, who politely rose to his feet. "By all means! Our gardens are famous! You will find them refreshing after the turmoil of this morning!"

"Thank you, Jaswyn, for your courtesy," said Dhrun.

Jaswyn moved away. Dhrun and Madouc went out into the gardens which

surrounded Falu Ffail, and sauntered among the fountains, statues, flower beds, topiary and patches of green lawn. Dhrun said: "I noticed the maiden Kylas speaking to you. What was her message?"

"She brought the queen's command! I was ordered to my chambers, to make ready for the return journey to Haidion."

Dhrun laughed incredulously. "And what did you say?"

"I said: 'No!' of course. Kylas was amazed, and departed in shock. A few moments later I saw Queen Sollace complaining to the king. He looked at

me, and I was very much frightened."

Dhrun took her hand. "You shall come to Troicinet. Are we agreed on this?"

"Yes. Especially since I have nowhere else to go. I doubt if ever I shall find my father, which perhaps is all for the best."

Dhrun led the way to a bench; the two seated themselves. He asked, "Why do you say that?"

"In truth, I am afraid of what I might find. When Sir Pellinore met my mother he was carefree and full of artful gaiety. Now, all is changed. The years have come and gone; perhaps he has become

austere and aloof, or settled in his ways, or married to a woman of severe character, who has given him several unpleasant children. None would like me, or take me warmly into their family."

"If you found this unfortunate man, it would be wise to approach him anonymously, and with great caution."

"Even so, I would be forced to reveal myself in the end. No doubt he would insist that, willy-nilly, I join his sordid household, and I might be reluctant to do so."

"It might not be so bad as you think."

"Perhaps not. It might be worse, to my distress! I am not partial to folk who are grim and austere. I prefer fanciful folk who make me laugh."

"Hmf," said Dhrun. "I would seem to be a failure-much like poor miserable Sir Pellinore, with his virago of a spouse and his smelly children. I seldom see you laugh."

"I am laughing now! Sometimes I smile quietly when you are not looking, or even when I am thinking of you."

Dhrun turned his head and looked down into her face. He said: "I pity the poor wretch you finally decide to marry; he

will be in a constant state of nerves."

"Not at all!" said Madouc airily. "I would undertake to train him, and it should be easy enough, once he learned a few simple rules. He would be fed regularly, and I would sit with him if his manners were polite. He would not be allowed to snore, nor wipe his nose on his sleeve, nor sing loudly over his beer, nor keep dogs in the house. To gain my favor, he would learn to kneel nicely before me that he might tender me a red rose or perhaps a bouquet of violets, and then, with his best voice, beseech a touch of my fingers."

"And then?"



"Much depends upon circumstances."

"Hm," said Dhrun. "The spouse of your dreams, as you describe him, would seem idealistic and rather meek."

"Not altogether and not always."

"He would surely lead an interesting life."

"I expect so. Of course I have not seriously considered the subject, except to decide whom I will marry when the time comes."

Dhrun said, "I also know whom I will marry. She has blue eyes, as soft as the

sky and as deep as the sea, and red curls."

"They are more of a copper-gold, are they not?"

"Quite so, and although she is still young, she grows prettier by the minute, and I do not know how long I will be able to resist the temptations which push at me."

Madouc looked up at him. "Would you like to kiss me now, just for practice?"

"Certainly." Dhrun kissed her, and for a time they sat close together, with Madouc's head on Dhrun's shoulder.

Dhrun presently asked, "Now: are you still in fear of Casmir?"

Madouc sighed. "Yes! I fear him greatly. Though for a time I had forgotten him."

Dhrun rose to his feet. "There is nothing he can do to you, unless you obey his orders."

"I will not obey him, that would be folly."

"There is no more to the colloquy, and my father does not want to embarrass King Audry by staying over. He wants to leave as soon as possible, perhaps within the hour, to catch the ebb tide."

"I will need only a few minutes, to change from these pretty clothes, and bundle up a few other things."

"Come, I will take you to your chambers."

Dhrun escorted Madouc to the east wing and to her door. "I will be back in ten minutes. Remember: allow no one to enter, except your maid."

Ten minutes later, when Dhrun returned to Madouc's chambers, the maid reported that Madouc was gone, having departed only minutes before accompanied by three men-at-arms of Lyonesse.

Dhrun groaned. "I told her to keep her door locked and to admit no one!"

"She followed your instructions, but they came from the chambers next door into the parlour! The Damsel Kylas opened the door to them!"

Dhrun ran back to the reception hall. King Casmir was no longer present, nor was King Audry, nor yet Aillas.

Dhrun made urgent inquiries and at last discovered Aillas in a small chamber to the side of the reception hall, in conversation with Audry.

Dhrun burst in upon them. "Casmir has

taken Madouc away by force! She was to ride with us, but now she is gone!"

Aillas jumped to his feet, face taut with fury. "Casmir went off five minutes ago! We must catch them before they cross the river! Audry, allow me eight fast horses at this very instant!"

"You shall have them, at best speed!"

Aillas sent messengers to the knights of his company, ordering their immediate presence at the front of the palace.

The horses were brought from the stables; Aillas, Dhrun and the six Troice knights of their escort mounted, wheeled

and galloped off at a rush, south along the road to the Cambermouth ferry. Far ahead, the troop from Lyonesse could be seen, also riding at a pounding gallop.

Dhrun called over his shoulder to Aillas: "We will never catch them! They will be aboard the ferry and gone!"

"How many ride in their company?"

"I cannot make it out. They are too far!"

"It looks to be a troop about like our own. Casmir will not choose to stand and fight."

"Why should he fight when he can

escape us on the ferry?"

"True."

Dhrun cried out in fury: "He will torment her, and take his revenge in some horrid fashion!"

Aillas gave a curt nod, but made no comment.

Far ahead, Casmir's party mounted the bluff which bordered the river, passed over the crest and was lost to view.

Five minutes later the Troice company rode to the edge of the scarp, where they could overlook the river. A hempen



hawser led from a nearby stone buttress at a slant across the river to a similar buttress at Cogstone Head. The ferry, attached to the hawser by a bridle and a sheave rolling along the hawser, was propelled by reason of the slant of the hawser. When the tide ebbed, the ferry was taken south; when the tide was at flood, the ferry was driven north across the river. A half-mile to the west, another hawser slanted in the opposite direction, so that with each change of the tide, the ferries crossed the Cambermouth in opposite directions.

The ferry conveying Casmir and his company was just now leaving the shore. His party had dismounted and were tying

their horses to a rail. A slender still form wrapped in a brown cloak indicated the presence of Madouc. There seemed to be a bandage or a gag across her mouth.

Dhrun stared hopelessly at the ferry. Casmir looked back once, his face an impassive white mask. "They have evaded us," said Dhrun. "By the time we can cross the river they will be to the other side of Pomperoi."

"Come!" said Aillas in sudden exultation. "They have not evaded us yet."

He rode pell-mell along the scarp to the

buttress which anchored the hawser. He jumped to the ground and, drawing his sword, hacked at the taut cable. Strand by strand, twist by twist, the hawser was severed. The ferry tender, looking up from his hut, shouted a frantic protest, to which Aillas paid no heed. He hacked, sawed and cut; the cable sang, spun, as tension over taxed the fibers. The hawser parted, the loose end snaking down the face of the scarp and into the water. The ferry, no longer impelled by the sidewise thrust of the current, drifted down the estuary toward the open sea. The hawser sang loosely through the sheave and at last pulled free altogether.

The ferry drifted quietly on the tide.

Casmir and his party stood with sagging shoulders looking helplessly toward the shores.

"Come," said Aillas. "We will board the Flor Velas; it awaits our arrival."

The company rode down the scarp to the harbour where the Flor Velas, a galleass eighty feet long with a square sail, a pair of lateen sails and fifty oars, rested at its mooring. Aillas' party dismounted, put the horses into charge of the harbourmaster, and boarded the ship, Aillas giving the instant order to cast off. Mooring lines were loosed from the bitts; the sails unfurled to catch a favorable north wind, and the vessel

eased out into the estuary.

Half an hour later the Flor Velas drew close beside the ferry and made fast with grappling hooks. Aillas stood on the after deck with Dhrun; the two looked down with expressionless faces at Casmir's sour countenance. Cassander attempted a flippant salute to Dhrun and Aillas, which neither acknowledged, and Cassander haughtily turned his back.

From the midship deck of the galleass a ladder was dropped to the deck of the ferry; four men-at-arms descended. Ignoring all others, they went to Madouc, pulled the bandage from her mouth and led her to the ladder. Dhrun came down

from the afterdeck and helped her aboard.

The men-at-arms climbed back aboard the Flor Velas. Casmir, standing to the side, heavy legs spread apart, watched with out expression.

No words had been spoken, either from galleass or from ferry. For a moment Aillas stood looking down at Casmir's party. He told Dhrun: "If I were a truly wise king, here and now I would kill Casmir, and perhaps Cassander as well, and put an end to their line. Look at Casmir; he half expects it! He would have not a qualm in the world; indeed he would kill us both and rejoice in the

act!" Aillas gave his head a jerk. "I cannot do it. I may live to regret my weakness, but I cannot kill in cold blood."

He gave a signal. The grappling hooks were jerked loose and brought aboard the galleass, which eased away from the ferry. Wind bellied the sails; wake bubbled astern and the galleass drove down the Cambermouth and toward the open sea. From the Daut shore a pair of longboats, each manned by a dozen oarsmen, put out after the ferry. They took it in tow and with help from the turning tide brought it back to the dock.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## I

Upon returning to Castle Haidion, King Casmir went into virtual seclusion. He attended no court functions, received no visitors, granted no audiences. For the most part he kept to his private chambers, where he paced up and down the length of his parlour, pausing occasionally by the window to look out over the town and the gray-blue Lir beyond. Queen Sollace dined with him each night, but Casmir had little to say, so that more often than not Sollace lapsed into plaintive silence. After four



days of brooding, Casmir summoned Sir Baltasar, a trusted counsellor and envoy. Casmir gave Sir Baltasar careful instructions and sent him off on a secret mission to Godelia.

Upon the departure of Sir Baltasar, Casmir resumed many of his former routines, though his mood had changed. He had become terse, sharp in his commands, bitter in his judgments, and those who ran afoul either of Casmir or his justice now, more than ever, had cause for regret.

In due course Sir Baltasar returned, dusty and haggard from hard riding. He reported at once to King Casmir: "I

arrived at Dun Cruighre without incident. The town lacks all grace; you might well hesitate to stable your horses in the royal palace."

"King Dartweg would not receive me immediately. At first I thought his motives to be sheer Celtic perversity, but later I learned that he was entertaining certain grandees from Ireland, and all were drunk. Finally he agreed to receive me, but even then he kept me standing to the side of his hall while he settled a dispute dealing with the breeding of a cow. The wrangling went on for an hour and was interrupted twice by dog fights. I tried to follow the litigation but found it beyond my

understanding. The cow had been freshened by a prize bull without authorization and free of charge, by reason of a break in the fence; the cow owner not only refused to pay the stud fee, but beseeched a penalty for the illicit advantage taken of his cow by the amorous bull. King Dartweg was now gnawing a bone and drinking mead from a horn. He adjudicated the case in a manner I still find perplexing, but which must have been equitable, since it pleased no one.

"I was at last brought forward and presented to the king, who was quite drunk. He asked me my business; I said that I wished a private audience, that I

might deliver the confidential messages entrusted to me by Your Highness. He waved high the bone upon which he was gnawing and declared that he saw no reason for 'fiddle-faddle'; that I must speak out brave and bold like a good Celt. Stealth and furtive timidity were useless, he claimed; and secrecy was pointless, since everyone knew my business as well as I knew it myself; indeed, he could give me his answer without my so much as hinting of my mission; would that be suitable? He thought so, since it would expedite affairs and enlarge the time for tilting of the horn.

"I maintained as much dignity as was

possible under the circumstances, and stated that protocol compelled me to request a private audience. He handed me a hornful of mead and told me to swallow all at a single draught, and this I managed to do, thereby gaining King Dartweg's favor, and allowing me to mutter my message into his ear.

"In the end I spoke with King Dartweg on three occasions. Each time he sought to fill me full of strong mead, apparently hoping that I should become foolish and dance a jig, or babble my secrets.

Needless to say, the attempt was fruitless, and in the end he began to find me a dull fellow, drunk or sober, and became surly. At our last meeting he

blurted out his fixed and settled policies. In essence, he wants the fruits of victory with none of the risks. He will join our cause gladly, once we demonstrate that we have gained the upper hand over our enemies."

"That is certainly a policy of caution," said Casmir. "He has everything to gain and nothing to lose."

"He acknowledged as much, and said that it was in the best interests of his health, since only a program of this sort allowed him to sleep well of nights.

"I spoke of the need for a specific undertaking; he only waved his hand and

said that you were not to worry on his account. He claimed that he would know the precise instant when the time was ripe and then he would be on hand in full force."

King Casmir grunted. "We are listening to the voice of an opportunistic braggart! What next?"

"From Dun Cruighre I journeyed by ship to Skaghane, where I met a dozen frustrations but gained no profit. The Ska are not only inscrutable and opaque in their conversation, but large in their manner. They neither want nor need alliances, and have a positive aversion for all folk but themselves. I broached

the matter at hand, but they brushed it aside, giving neither 'yes' nor 'no', as if the matter were arrant nonsense. From Skaghane I bring back no news whatever."

Casmir rose to his feet and began to pace back and forth. He spoke, more to himself than to Sir Baltasar: "We are assured only of ourselves. Dartweg and his Celts in the end will serve us, out of greed. Pomperol and Blaloc will stand rigid, paralyzed by fear. I had hoped for distraction, or even rebellion, among the Ulfs, but they merely crouch like sullen animals in their high glens. Torqual, despite my great expense, has done nothing. He and his witchwoman are



fugitives; they maraud along the moors by night, and take cover by day. The peasants consider them ghouls. Sooner or later they will be brought to bay and slaughtered like wild beasts. No one will mourn them."

## II

Shimrod sat in his garden, somnolent in the shade of a bay tree. His garden was at its best. Pink hollyhocks stood like shy maidens in a row along the front of his manse; elsewhere blue delphinium, daisies, marigolds, alyssum, verbena, wallflowers, and much else grew in casual clumps and clusters.

Shimrod sat with eyes half closed, letting his mind wander without restraint: through follies and fancies, along unfamiliar landscapes. He came to an engaging notion: if odors could be represented by color, then the scent of grass could be nothing else but fresh green. In the same way, the perfume of a rose must inevitably be rendered by velvet red, and the scent of the liotrope would be a ravishing lavender purple.

Shimrod conceived a dozen other such equivalences, and was surprised how often and how closely his colors, derived by induction, matched the natural and irrefutable color of the object from which the odor originated. It

was a remarkable correspondence! Could it be ascribed to simple coincidence? Even the acrid tang of the daisy seemed perfectly consonant with the white, so prim and stark, of the flower itself!

Shimrod smiled, wondering whether similar transferences, involving the other senses, might exist. The mind was a marvellous instrument, thought Shimrod; when left to wander untended, it often arrived at curious destinations. Shimrod watched a lark flying across the meadow. The scene was tranquil. Perhaps too tranquil, too serene, too quiet. It was easy to become melancholy thinking how quickly the days slipped

past. What was lacking at Trilda was the sound of conviviality and happy voices.

Shimrod sat up in his chair. The work must be done, and sooner was better than later. He rose to his feet and after a last look around Lally Meadow went to his workroom. The tables, once stacked high with a miscellany of articles, were now greatly reduced of their burden. Much of what remained was stubborn stuff, obscure, arcane, or intrinsically complex, or perhaps it had been rendered incomprehensible by Tamurello's eery tricks.

To one of the articles still under investigation Shimrod had given the

name 'Lucanor', after the Druidic god of  
Primals.<sup>14</sup>

Lucanor-the magical artifice, or toy-  
consisted of seven transparent disks, a  
hand's-breadth in diameter. They rolled  
around the edge of a circular tablet of  
black onyx, at varying speeds. The disks  
swam with soft colors, and occasionally  
showed pulsing black spots of  
emptiness, coming and going apparently  
at random.

Shimrod found the disks a source of  
perplexity. They moved independently of  
each other, or so it seemed, so that in  
their circuit of the tablet, one might pass  
another, and in turn be overtaken by still

a third. At times two disks rolled in tandem, so that one was superimposed upon the other, as if an attraction held them together for a few instants. Then they would break apart and each would once more roll its own course. At rare intervals, even a third disk might arrive while two disks rolled together, and for a space the third disk also would linger, for a period perceptibly longer than if just two disks were together. Shimrod once or twice had observed what would seem to be a very rare chance, when four disks chanced to roll together around the tablet, and then they clung together for perhaps twenty seconds before parting company.

Shimrod had placed Lucanor on a bench where it could catch the afternoon sunlight, and also where it most efficiently distracted him from his other work. Was Lucanor a toy, or a complex curio, or an analog representing some larger process? He wondered if ever five of the seven disks might roll in unison, or six, or even all seven. He tried to calculate the probability of such concurrences, without success. The chances, while real, must be exceedingly remote, so he reflected.

At times, when a pair of disks rolled together, their black spots, or holes, might develop simultaneously and sometimes overlapped. On one

occasion, when three disks rolled in unison, black spots grew on each of the three, and by some freak, they were superimposed. Shimrod squinted through the aligned holes as the disks rolled past; to his surprise he saw flickering lines of fire, like far lightning. The black holes disappeared; the disks parted company, to roll their separate courses as before.

Shimrod stood back in contemplation of Lucanor. The device undoubtedly served a serious purpose-but what? He could arrive at no sensible theory. Perhaps he should bring Lucanor to the attention of Murgan. Shimrod temporized, since he would far prefer to resolve the puzzle



himself. Three of Tamurello's ledgers remained to be deciphered; there might be a reference to Lucanor in one or another of the tomes.

Shimrod returned to his work, but continued to watch the seven disks, causing him such distraction that at last he put a low-order sandestin on watch for unusual coincidences, and then took Lucanor to a far corner of the workroom.

The days passed; Shimrod found no reference to Lucanor in the ledgers, and gradually lost interest in the disks. One morning, Shimrod took himself to his workroom as usual. Almost as soon as he passed through the door, the sandestin

monitor called out an alarm: "Shimrod! Attend your disks! Five roll together in congruence!"

Shimrod crossed the room on swift strides. He looked down in something like awe. For a fact, five of the disks had joined to roll as one around the periphery of the tablet. Further, the disks showed no disposition to separate. And what was this? A sixth disk came rolling to overtake the five, and as Shimrod watched, it edged close, shuddered, merged into place with the others.

Shimrod watched in fascination, certain that he was witnessing an important event or, more likely, the representation

of such an event. And now the seventh and last disk came to join the others, and the seven rolled as one. The single disk changed in color, to become marbled maroon and purple-black; it rolled lethargically, and showed no disposition to break apart. At the center a black spot grew dense and large. Shimrod bent to look through the hole; he saw what appeared to be a landscape of black objects outlined in golden fire.

Shimrod jerked away from Lucanor and ran to his workbench. He struck a small silver gong and waited, looking into a round mirror. Murgan failed to acknowledge the signal. Shimrod struck the gong again, more sharply. Again: no

effect.

Shimrod stood back, face drawn into lines of concern. Murgan occasionally went to walk on the parapets.

Infrequently, he left Swer Smod, sometimes by reasons of urgency, sometimes for sheer frivolity. Usually he notified Shimrod of his movements.

Shimrod struck the gong a third time. The result was as be fore: silence.

Troubled and uneasy, Shimrod turned away, and went back to stare at Lucanor.

### III

Along the crest of the Teach tac Teach, from the Troagh in the south to the Gwyr Aig Rift in the north, a line of crags stood in a stern sequence, each more harsh and forbidding than the next. At about the center Mount Sobh raised a trapezoidal jut of granite high to split the passing clouds; Arra Kaw, next to the north, was if anything even more harsh and desolate.

Where the high moors broke against the base of Arra Kaw five tall dolmens, the 'Sons of Arra Kaw', stood in a circle, enclosing an area forty feet in diameter. Where the westernmost stone gave a measure of protection against the wind, a rude hut had been built, of stones and

sod. Clouds raced across the sky, passing in front of the sun to send shadows fleeting across the dun moors. Wind blew through gaps between the five Sons, creating a soft wailing sound which sometimes throbbed and fluttered to the changing force and direction of the wind.

Before the hut a small fire burned fitfully below an iron kettle which hung from a spindly tripod. Beside the fire stood Torqual, looking bleakly down into the blaze. Melanthe, impassive, if somewhat wan, and wrapped in a heavy brown cloak, knelt across from Torqual, stirring the contents of the kettle. She had cut her hair short and wore a soft leather

casque which clasped her glossy dark curls close to her face.

Torqual thought he heard a calling voice. He jerked around, cocked his head to listen. He turned to Melancthe, who had raised her head. Torqual asked: "Did you hear the call?"

"Perhaps."

Torqual went to a gap between the Sons and peered out across the moors. Ten miles to the north the crag known as Tangué Fna reared even higher and more steeply than Arra Kaw. Between the two crags spread high moors, dappled by moving cloud shadows. Torqual saw a

hawk, sliding eastward down the wind. As he watched, the hawk uttered a wild cry, almost inaudible.

Torqual allowed himself to relax, reluctantly, so it seemed, as if he were not averse that someone should dare attack him. He turned back toward the fire, and halted in frowning puzzlement. Melanthe, her face rapt, had risen to her feet and was walking slowly toward the hut. In the gloom behind the doorway Torqual was startled to observe the shape of a woman. Torqual stared. Was his mind playing hith tricks? The shape seemed not only nude, but also distorted, insubstantial and illuminated as if by a dim green glow.



Melancthe, on stiff legs, stepped into the hut. Torqual started to follow, but halted by the fire to stand irresolute, wondering if he had seen correctly. He listened. For a moment the wind ceased its noise and from the hut he seemed to hear the murmur of voices.

The situation could no longer be ignored. Torqual started for the hut, but before he could take three steps Melancthe emerged, walking with a firm step and carrying a short-handled implement formed of greenish-silver metal which Torqual had never seen before. He took it to be an ornamental hatchet, or a small halberd with a complex blade to one side and a four-

inch spike to the other. A similar spike protruded from the tip. Melanthe approached the fire, walking with a slow and measured tread, her face stern and somber. He watched her come with dour suspicion; this was not Melanthe as he knew her! Something untoward had occurred.

Torqual spoke curtly: "Who is the woman in the hut?"

"There is no one there."

"I heard voices and I saw a woman. Perhaps she was a witch, since she lacked both substance and clothing."

"So it may be."

"What is that~weapon, or tool, you are carrying?"

Melancthe looked at the implement as if seeing it for the first time. "It is a hatchet thing."

Torqual held out his hand. "Give it to me."

Melancthe, smiling, shook her head. "The touch of the blade would kill you."

"You touch it and you are not dead."

"I am inured to green magic."

Torqual went on long strides to the hut. Melancthe watched impassively. Torqual looked into the gloom: right, left, up and down, but discovered nothing. He returned thoughtfully to the fire. "The woman is gone. Why did you speak with her?"

"The whole story must wait. As of this instant, I can tell you this: an event of importance has occurred, for which plans have long been made. You and I must go now to do what needs to be done."

Torqual said harshly: "Speak in clear terms, if you please, and leave off your riddles!"

"Exactly so! You shall hear not riddles, but definite orders." Melanthe's voice was heavy and strong; she stood with head thrown back, eyes showing a green glitter. "Arm yourself and bring up the horses. We leave this place at once."

Torqual glowered across the fire. He controlled his voice with an effort. "I obey neither man nor woman. I go where I choose, and do only as I find needful."

"The need has come."

"Ha! The need is not mine."

"The need is yours. You must honour the compact you made with Zagzig the

shybalt."

Torqual, taken aback, frowned across the fire. He said at last: "That was long ago. The 'compact', as you put it, was only loose talk over wine."

"Not so! Zagzig offered the most beautiful woman alive, who would serve you as you wished and wherever you went, so long as you defended her and her interests in time of need. To this you agreed."

"I see none of this need," grumbled Torqual.

"I assure you that it exists."

"Explain it, then!"

"You shall see for yourself. We ride to Swer Smod, to do what needs be done."

Torqual stared in new astonishment.

"That is fateful folly! Even I fear Murgen; he is supreme!"

"Not now! A way has opened and someone else is supreme! But time is of the essence! We must act before the way closes! So come, while power is ours! Or do you prefer skulking your life away on these windy moors?"

Torqual turned on his heel. He left the area and saddled the horses and the two

departed the five Sons of Arra Kaw. At best speed they rode across the moor, at times outracing the cloud shadows. Arriving at a trail, they veered to the east and followed the trail down the mountainside: back, forth, across tumbles of scree, down declivities and gullies, at last to come out upon the bulge of a bluff overlooking Swer Smod. They dismounted and clambered down the hillside afoot, halting in the shadow of the castle's outer walls.

Melancthe took the leather casque from her head and wrapped it around the head of the halberd-hatchet. She spoke, in a voice harsh as stone grinding on stone. "Take the hatchet. I can carry it no



farther. Do not touch the blade; it will suck out your life."

Torqual gingerly took the black wood handle. "What am I to do with it?"

"I will instruct you. Listen to my voice but, henceforth, do not look back, no matter what happens. Go now to the front portal. I will come behind. Do not look back."

Torqual scowled, finding the venture ever less to his taste. He set off around the wall. Behind him he heard a soft sound: a sigh, a gasp, then Melancthe's footsteps.

At the front portal Torqual halted to survey the forecourt, where Vus and Vuwas, the devils who guarded the postern, had contrived a new entertainment to help while away the time. They had trained a number of cats to perform the function of war-chargers. The cats were caparisoned with gay clothes, fine saddles and a variety of noble emblems, that they might serve as proper steeds for knightly rats, themselves well-trained and clad in shining mail and gallant helmets. Their weapons were wooden swords and padded tourney lances; as the devils watched, placed wagers and cried out in excitement, the rat knights spurred their

cat chargers and sent them springing down the lists in the effort to unseat each other.

Melancthe stepped through the portal; Torqual started to follow. A voice behind him said: "Go easy and quiet; the devils are intent upon their game; we shall try to slip by unnoticed."

Torqual stopped short. The voice said sharply: "Do not turn! Melancthe will do what is needful; so she justifies her life!"

Torqual saw that Melancthe was now as before: the pensive maiden he had first met in the white villa by the sea.

The voice said: "Go now, and quietly. They will not notice." Torqual followed Melancthe; they went unseen along the side of the forecourt. At the last moment, the red devil Vuwas, his rat and cat having been defeated, swung away in disgust and so glimpsed the intruders. "Hoa!" he cried out. "Who thinks to pass, on sly knees and long toes? I smell evil at work!" He called his associate. "Vus, come! We have work to do!"

Melancthe spoke in a metallic voice: "Go back to your game, good devils! We are here to assist Murgen in his wizardry, and we are late, so let us pass!"

"That is the language of interlopers! Folk of virtue bring us gratuities! That is how we distinguish good from evil! You would seem to represent the latter category."

"That is a mistake," said Melanthe politely. "Next time we will surely do better." She turned to Torqual. "Go at once; ask Murgan to step out and certify our quality. I will wait and watch the jousting."

Torqual sidled away as Vus and Vuwas were momentarily distracted. "Start a new course at the lists!" called Melanthe. "I will place a wager. Which is the champion rat?"

"Just a minute!" cried Vus. "What is that disgusting green shadow which dogs your back?"

"It is of no consequence," said Torqual. He hastened his pace and so arrived at the tall iron door. The voice behind him said, "Bare the edge of the hatchet and cut the hinges! Take care not to damage the point; it must serve another purpose!"

A cry of sudden anguish sounded from the forecourt. "Do not look back!" grated the voice. Torqual had already turned. The devils, so he discovered, had fallen upon Melancthe, and were chasing her back and forth across the yard, kicking with taloned feet and striking out with

great horny fists. Torqual stared, irresolute, half of a mind to interfere. The voice spoke harshly: "Cut the hinges! Be quick!"

From the side of his eye Torqual glimpsed the distorted semblance of a woman, formed from a pale green gas. He jerked away, eyes starting from his head, stomach knotted in revulsion.

"Cut the hinges!" rasped the voice.

Torqual spoke in a fury: "You impelled me this far by reason of my idle words with Zagzig! I will not deny them, since nothing remains of my honour save the sanctity of my word. But the compact

concerned Melancthe, and now she is beyond need. I will not serve you; that again is my word, and you may rely upon it!"

"But you must," said the voice. "Do you want inducement? What do you crave? Power? You shall be king of Skaghane, if you choose, or all the Ulflands!"

"I want no such power."

"Then I will drive you by pain, though it costs me dear in strength to do so, and you shall suffer sadly for my inconvenience."

Torqual heard a thin hissing sound of



great effort; he was gripped at the back of his head, behind his ears, by sharp pincerlike fingers; they pressed deep and the pain caused his sight to go dim and his mind to segment into irresolute parts. "Cut the hinges with the edge of the hatchet; be careful of the point."

Torqual drew the leather away from the curved green-silver blade and slashed at the iron hinges. They melted like butter under a hot knife; the door fell open.

"Enter!" said the voice, and the pincers applied new pressure. Torqual stumbled forward into Swer Smod's entry hail. "Ahead now! Down the gallery at best speed!"

With eyes starting from his head, Torqual went at a shambling run down the gallery and so arrived at the great hall.

"We are in time," said the voice with satisfaction. "Go forward."

In the hall Torqual came upon a curious scene. Murgan sat stiff and still in his chair, gripped by six long thin arms, putty-gray in color, sparsely overgrown with coarse black hairs. The arms terminated in enormous hands, two of which gripped Murgan's ankles; two more pinioned his wrists; the final two covered his face, leaving only his two gray eyes visible. The arms extended

from a slit or a notch opening into another space directly behind Murgan's chair. The aperture admitted, along with the arms, a faint suffusion of green light.

The voice said: "I now give you surcease from pain. Obey precisely, or it will return a hundredfold! My name is Desmei; I command great power. Do you hear?"

"I hear."

"Do you notice a glass globe dangling from a chain?"

"I see it."

"It contains green plasm and the skeleton of a weasel. You must climb upon a chair, cut the chain with the hatchet and with great care bring down the globe. With the point of the hatchet, you shall puncture the globe, allowing me to extract the plasm and therewith restore my full strength. I will seal the bubble once more, and compress and close Murgan into a similar bubble. Then I will have achieved my aims, and you shall be rewarded in such style as you deserve. I tell you this so that you may act with precision. Do I make myself clear?"

"You are clear."

"Act then! Up with you! Cut the chain, using all delicacy."

Torqual climbed upon a chair. His face was now on a level with the weasel skeleton inside the glass globe. The beady black eyes stared into his own. Torqual raised the hatchet and, as if accidentally, slashed at the glass bubble, so that green plasm began to seep out. From below came a horrid scream of fury: "You have broken the glass!"

Torqual cut the chain and allowed the globe to fall; striking the floor it broke into a dozen pieces, sending green plasm spurting in all directions. The weasel skeleton uncoiled painfully from its

'hunched position and scuttled to hide under a chair. Desmei hurled herself to the floor and gathered as much of the green plasm as possible, and so began to assume physical form, showing first the outlines of internal organs, then a fixing of her contours. Back and forth she crawled, sucking up seepages of the green with her mouth and tongue.

A sibilant voice came to Torqual's ears: "Take the hatchet! Stab her with the point! Do not hesitate, or we will all be in torment forever!"

Torqual seized the hatchet; a swift step took him to Desmei. She saw him coming and cried out in fear. "Do not

strike!" She rolled away and pulled herself to her feet. Torqual was after her, and followed her step by step, hatchet held before him, until Desmei backed into a wall and could retreat no further. "Do not strike! I will be nothing! It is my death!"

Torqual thrust the point through Desmei's neck; her substance seemed to be sucked into the blade of the hatchet, which swelled in size as Desmei shrank and dissipated.

Desmei was gone.' Torqual was left holding a heavy short-handled hatchet with a complicated blade of silver-green metal. He turned and brought the hatchet

back to the table. Tamurello, the weasel skeleton, had emerged from under the chair; he had grown in size until now he stood as tall as Torqual. From a cabinet, Tamurello brought out a board four feet long and two feet wide, on which rested the simulacrum of a strange gray creature, human in general configuration, with glistening gray skin, short hairy neck, heavy head with smeared features and the filmy eyes of a dead fish. A hundred gelatinous ribbons bound the creature to the board, restraining every twitch of movement.

Tamurello looked at Torqual. "Can you name this thing, which is only an image of reality?"



'No.

"I will tell you then. It is Joald, and Murgen has given his life to the restraint of this thing, despite the forces which try for its liberation. Before I kill Murgen, he shall watch me destroy his earnest effort, and he shall know that Joald arises. Murgen, do you hear me?"

Murgen made a throaty sound.

"Little time remains before the way closes and the arms draw back. But there is time enough for all, and first, I will liberate the monster. Torqual!"

"I am here."

"Certain bonds hold Joald in check!"

"I see them."

"Take your sword and cut the bonds, and I will sing the chant. Cut!"

From Murgan came a thin keening sound. Torqual daunted, stood hesitant.

Tamurello croaked: "Do my bidding; you will share with me my wealth and magical power; I swear it! Cut!"

Torqual came slowly forward.

Tamurello began to chant monosyllables, of the most profound import. They tore the air and incited Torqual into half-

hypnotic motion. His arm lifted; his blade gleamed on high. Down came the blade! The strand binding Joald's right wrist parted.

"Cut!" screamed Tamurello.

Torqual cut; the ribbons binding Joald's elbow parted with a hiss and snap! The arm pulsed and twisted.

"Cut!"

Torqual raised the sword and cut the strand at Joald's neck. Tamurello's chant reverberated through the castle, so that the stones sang and hissed.

"Cut! Cut! Cut!" screamed Tamurello.  
"Murgen, oh Murgen! Taste my triumph!  
Taste, and weep bitter tears, for the  
waste I shall do to your pretty things!"

Torqual cut the ribbon binding Joald's forehead, while Tamurello intoned the great spell: the most terrible chant yet heard in the world. Deep in the ocean Joald took sluggish cognizance of his loosened bonds. He strained against the remaining filaments; he heaved and kicked, and struck the submarine pillars which ultimately prevented the Teach tac Teach from sliding into the sea, and the land shuddered. Joald's enormous black right arm was free; he raised it high, groping and clutching with monstrous

black fingers, that he might achieve the destruction of the Elder Isles. The arm broke the surface; sheets of green ocean cascaded down to churn up foam. By dint of an awful struggle Joald thrust the top of his head above the surface, where it became a sudden new island, with bony ridges cresting along the center; waves two hundred feet high surged away in all directions.

At Trilda, Shimrod struck the silver gong yet again, then turned away and went to a box hanging on the wall. He opened the front panels, spoke three words and applied his eye to a crystal lens. For a moment he stood rigid; then, stumbling back, he ran to his cabinet,

buckled on his sword, pulled a cap down upon his head and went to stand on a disk of black stone. He uttered a spell of instant transfer and in a trice stood in the forecourt of Swer Smod. Vus and Vuwas still toyed with the bloody rag that once had been Melanthe. At their behest the torn body jerked back and forth in a grisly jig, while they chortled and complimented the indefatigable vitality of the thing. They gave Shimrod a pair of quick suspicious glances, just long enough to recognize him, and in any case were bored with their routine duties and so allowed him to pass without challenge.

Shimrod stepped through the broken

doorway, and at once felt the force of Tamurello's chant. He ran down the gallery and burst into the great hail. Murgan sat as before, constricted by the six arms from Xabiste. The weasel skeleton, as it chanted the great spell, seemed to be altering shape and taking on substance. Torqual, standing beside the table, took note of Shimrod's arrival. He stood glowering, sword raised on high.

Shimrod cried out: "Torqual! Are you mad that you obey Tamurello?"

Torqual spoke in dull voice: "I do what I choose to do."

"Then you are worse than mad, and you must die."

"It is you who shall die," said Torquai in a voice of fate.

Shimrod came forward with drawn sword. He hacked down upon the weasel skeleton, and cleaved it to the fragile pelvis. The chant abruptly stopped, and Tamureilo was a heap of twitching bone-splinters.

Torqual looked at the simulacrum of Joald, now writhing against his remaining bonds. Torqual muttered under his breath: "So this is the purpose of my life? I am mad indeed."



Shimrod swung his sword in an arc which would have taken Torqual's head from his torso had it struck home; Torqual jerked aside. Emotion came upon him in a frenzy; he flung himself at Shimrod with such wild energy that Shimrod was forced back upon the defensive. So the two fought, in a mutual fury: slash, hack, thrust.

Beside the table the scatter of bones had pulled together to form a random construction with the glittering black eyes looking out, one low, the other high. A spindly arm clawed at the hatchet, raised it high, while from the tangle of bones came a croaking voice chanting the great spell.

Shimrod dodged back from Torqual, threw a chair to impede him, then cut at the arm holding the hatchet. The arm splintered; the hatchet fell to the floor. Shimrod picked up the hatchet and as Torqual charged upon him, flung it into Torqual's face. Torqual's head and face shriveled and disappeared; his sword fell clattering to the floor, followed by his body.

Shimrod turned back to the table. The way into Xabiste was closing; to Shimrod's horror the arms, rather than disengaging, were drawing Murgan, chair and all, back through the slit.

Shimrod hacked at the thin gray arms.

The hands fell to the floor, fingers clenching and unclenching. Murgan was free. He stood erect, and stepping forward, looked down at Joald. He uttered four plangent words. Joald's head lolled back; the arm dropped down beside the hulking torso.

In the Atlantic, the island created by the appearance of Joald's black pate sank beneath the surface. The arm fell with an enormous splash, creating a wave four hundred feet high which rolled toward the coast of South Ulfland. It struck full into the estuary of the Evander and sent a monstrous wall of water rushing up the valley, and the fabulous city Ys was lost.

Where Joald had lurched and kicked away the buttresses under Hybras Isle, the ground shuddered and sank, and Evander Vale, with its palaces and gardens, became an inlet of the sea.

North up the Ulfish coast, almost as far as Oaldes, the shoreside towns were drowned and the populations washed into the sea. When the waters became calm, Ys of the Ages, Ys the Beautiful, Ys of the Many Palaces, was sunk beneath the sea. In later times, when the light was right and the water clear, fishermen sometimes glimpsed the wonderful structures of marble, where nothing moved but schools of fish.

## IV

There was heavy silence in the great hail at Swer Smod. Murgen stood immobile by the table; Shimrod leaned against the wall. On the table the Joald simulacrum lay inert. The splintered bones of the weasel skeleton lay in a heap, showing no vitality save for the glitter of two black eyes. On the table the blade of the hatchet-halberd had altered, swelling and becoming first globular, then gradually taking on the semblance of a human face.

After a moment Murgen turned toward Shimrod. He spoke in a heavy voice. "So now we have known tragedy. I

cannot blame myself-but only because I cannot spare the energy. In truth, I fear that I became complacent, even arrogant, in the fullness of my strength and the certainty that no one would dare challenge me. I was wrong, and tragic events have occurred. Still, I may not allow myself to be injured by remorse."

Shimrod approached the table. "These things-are they still alive?"

"They are alive: Tamurello and Desmei, and desperately scheming for survival. This time I shall not dally with them and they shall fail." Murgan went to one of his cabinets and threw wide the doors. He worked at a whirling apparatus and

in due course evoked a glare of pink light and a queer fluting voice: "Murgen, I speak across the unthinkable gulf!"

"I do the same," said Murgen. "How goes your war with Xabiste?"

"Well enough. We ordered the whorl Sirmish and flushed the green from Fangusto. However, at Mang Meeps they came in force; the place is now infested."

"A pity! But take cheer! I now give you two hybrid demons, Desmei and Tamurello, both reeking with green."

"This is a pleasant event."

"Just so. You may send a trendl to take the pair, and to seek out any sops and seepages of green which they might have exuded."

For an instant the hall flickered with pink light; when it subsided the hatchet and the pile of bones were gone.

Murgen spoke: "Take the pair to the deepest pits of Myrdal, and seek out the hottest fires. There destroy them utterly, so that not even their last regrets linger in the flux. I will wait to learn of this final disposition."

"You must be patient!" said the effrit. "A deed worth doing is worth doing well! I



shall be at least ten of your seconds, with another two seconds for my ritual cleansing."

"I will wait."

Twelve seconds passed. The effrit from Myrdal spoke once more. "The deed is done. Of the two demons neither jot, atom, breath, thought nor tittle remain. The pits of Myrdal burn hot."

"Excellent!" said Murgan. "I wish you continued success against the green." He closed the cabinet, and turned back to the table, where he reinforced the bonds which held Joald quiescent.

Shimrod watched with disapproval.  
"Joald should also be destroyed."

Murgen spoke in a soft voice. "He is protected. Only this much is allowed to us, and then grudgingly."

"Who protects him?"

"Some of the old gods still live."

"Atlante?"

For a long moment Murgen said nothing. Then: "Certain names should not be named and certain topics are best not discussed."

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## I

Rumours of the cataclysm along the Ulfish coast reached Haidion three days after the event. King Casmir heard the reports with keen interest and impatiently awaited full details. A courier at last arrived, telling of the devastation which the ocean had wrought along the South Ulfish coast. Casmir's sole interest was the damage done to King Aillas' military capabilities. "How far north did the waves strike?"

"Not so far as Oaldes. The offshore islands diverted the waves. They also saved Skaghane and the Ska Foreshore."

"What do you know of Doun Darric?"

"It is King Aiiias' Ulfish capital, but it sits high on the middle moors and it took no damage."

"So the army suffered no losses?"

"I cannot say with certainty, Sire. No doubt warriors on leave were lost. I doubt if the army as a whole was much affected."

Casmir grunted. "And where is King

Aillas now?"

"Apparently he has taken ship from Troicinet and would be at sea."

"Very well. Go."

The courier bowed and departed. King Casmir looked around at the faces of his aides. "The time of decision is upon us. Our armies are trained and ready; they are poised for a swift advance and eager for a smashing defeat of the Dauts. When Dahaut is ours, we can deal with Aillas at leisure, no matter what nuisances he inflicts with his navy. What say you?"

One after another Casmir's aides told

him what he wanted to hear:

"The armies of Lyonesse are strong, numerous and indomitable! The leadership is good and the warriors are well-trained!"

"The armouries are well-stocked; the weaponmakers work both night and day. We suffer no shortages."

"The knights of Lyonesse are keen and eager; all crave the rich lands of Dahaut for their estates! They await only your command."

King Casmir gave a fateful nod. He struck his fist on the table. "Then let it be

now."

## II

The armies of Lyonesse assembled in various quarters, marched as unobtrusively as possible to Fort Mael, reformed into battalions and set off to the north. At the Pomperol border the vanguard was met by a dozen knights commanded by Prince Starling. As the Lyonesse army approached the border, Prince Starling held up his hand, bidding the oncoming host to halt.

A herald galloped forward and delivered a message to Prince Starling: "The Kingdom of Lyonesse has been

prompted to conflict against the Kingdom of Dahaut, by reason of many and troublesome provocations. That we may expeditiously prosecute our campaign, we require the right of free passage across Pomperol, nor will we protest if in your neutrality you extend the same privilege to the troops of Dahaut."

Prince Starling made a forthright statement: "To allow you passage would compromise our proper neutrality, and in effect would make us your allies. We must deny the permission you require. Go instead to the west, to Lallisbrook Dingle, then bear north along Bladey Way, and so you will come into Dahaut."



The herald responded: "I am empowered to answer in this fashion: 'Not possible! Stand aside and let us pass, or taste our steel!'"

The Pomperol knights drew silently aside and watched as the armies of Lyonesse moved north and in due course entered Dahaut.

King Casmir had expected only token resistance from the so-called 'gray and green popinjays', but his invasion infuriated high and low alike. Three great battles were fought, instead of the single perfunctory engagement King Casmir had envisioned, at great cost in men, material and time. At Chastain

Field, a makeshift army led by Audry's brother Prince Graine attacked the invaders with reckless ferocity and were defeated after a day of bitter combat. The second battle was fought near the village Mulvanie. For two days the warriors surged back and forth across the downs. Steel clashed on steel; war shouts mingled with screams of pain. In and out of the mêle rode formations of mounted knights, hacking at the foot soldiers who sought to pull them down with halberds and crowhooks, so that knives could cut aristocratic throats.

The Daut army gave way at last, and retreated toward Avallon. Again King Casmir could claim a victory, though

again he had taken heavy casualties and had lost equally valuable time from his schedule of conquest.

The Daut army, now strengthened by reinforcements called down from Wysrod, took up a position beside Castle Meung near Market Chantry, some thirty miles south and west of Avallon. For two days King Casmir rested and reformed his troops, and waited another day for reinforcements from Fort Mael, then again advanced upon the Dauts, intent upon their final destruction.

The armies met on Wild Apple Meadow near Castle Meung, with the Dauts led

by King Audry himself. Each side sent out squads of light cavalry, to harass the enemy with arrows. The armoured knights, with heavy cavalry and standard bearers at their backs, formed themselves into opposing ranks, their steel gleaming ominously. And the minutes moved one after the other with fateful deliberation.

The Daut heralds, splendid in gray and green, raised their clarions and sounded a sweet shrill call. The Daut knights lowered their lances and charged at a thunderous gallop; the knights of Lyonesse did the same. At the center of Wild Apple' Meadow the two ranks collided in a great dull clang of metal

striking metal, and in an instant order gave way to a yelling chaos of toppling bodies, rearing horses, flashing steel. The Lyonesse charge was supported by squads of pikemen and archers, using disciplined tactics; in contrast, the Daut infantry arrived in amorphous groups, and were met by shoals of sighing arrows.

The battle at Wild Apple Meadow was shorter and more decisive than the two which had preceded it, since the Dauts now were demoralized and no longer expected to gain the day through sheer élan. They were finally sent reeling from the field.

King Audry and the surviving elements of his army retreated at best speed and took refuge in the Forest of Tantrevalles, where they no longer constituted a threat, and could be dealt with at leisure.

King Casmir marched upon Avallon, and entered without resistance. He rode at once to Falu Ffail, where he would finally take possession of Cairbra an Meadhan the table and Evandig the throne, and send them back to Castle Haidion in Lyonesse Town.

Casmir entered the quiet palace without ceremony. He went at once to the Hall of Heroes, only to find no sign of the furniture which figured so largely in his

ambitions. From a portly young underchamberlain he learned that Cairbra an Meadhan and Evandig had been taken away two days before by a company of Troice marine warriors. They had carried throne and table to a Troice ship and then set sail to a destination unknown.

Casmir's rage was almost too large to be borne. His face became congested with choler; his round china-blue eyes bulged so as to show white-encircling rims. With legs planted wide and hands gripping the back of a chair, Casmir stared blindly at the empty areas. His thoughts finally settled into a semblance of order and he chanted vows of revenge

which horrified Tibalt, the underchamberlain.

At last Casmir calmed himself, and thereby became even more baleful than before. The deed had been done with the connivance of the Dauts. Who were the persons responsible? Casmir put the question to Tibalt, who could only stammer that all the high officials of Falu Ffail had fled Avallon, to join their fugitive king. There was no one on hand to punish save underlings.

To Casmir's further displeasure, a courier arrived on a lathered horse with dispatches from Lyonesse, to the effect that Ulfish warriors had stormed down



the south ramparts of the Teach tac Teach into Cape Farewell Province, an area where Casmir's strongholds had been depleted of their garrisons for the benefit of the main army. The invaders had reduced castle after castle without difficulty and the town Pargetta was under siege.

Casmir took stock of his situation. He had broken the Daut armies and in effect controlled Dahaut, even though King Audry still survived and still commanded a few dispirited fugitives. Audry must be hunted down and either captured or killed, before he could rally the provincial gentry about him and assemble a new army. For this reason

Casmir could not yet weaken his expeditionary forces by detaching a force strong enough to expel the Ulfs from Cape Farewell Province. Instead, he sent Bannoy, Duke of Tremblance, to Fort Mael and there put together as best he could a new army comprising levies currently under training and contingents of veterans from garrisons at forts along the coast. These in turn must be reinforced by drafts of local yeomen, sufficient to resist the inevitable raids to be expected from the Troice navy.

Bannoy would take his fresh new army into Cape Farewell Province and there send the Ulf bandits scuttling back into the fastnesses of the Troagh. Meanwhile,

Casmir's forces in the field would complete the conquest of Dahaut. A courier from Godelia arrived at Falu Ffail, carrying a dispatch from King Dartweg. The courier paid his formal respects to King Casmir, then unrolled a scroll of glazed sheepskin parchment wound upon rods of birch. The message was written in fine Irish uncial which no one present could read, including the courier himself, and it became necessary to summon an Irish monk from the nearby Abbey of Saint Joilly who opened the scroll and read the message.

King Dartweg first saluted King Casmir, using a dozen florid apostrophes. He reviled their mutual enemies and

declared himself, as ever and always, from the start of time to final blink of the sun, Casmir's tenacious ally, ready to join the mutual fray against the twin tyrants Audry and Aillas, until the final grand victory and the sharing of the spoils.

To certify his faith, King Dartweg had ordered his invincible, if somewhat boisterous, warriors across the Skyre and into North Ulfland, where he hoped to take the old capital Xounges by crafty infiltration and surprise escapades from the seaside cliffs. So much accomplished, he would sweep south to smite the Troice interlopers. When all were dead, drowned, or fled, the

Godelians would stand on guard in the Ulflands, to the perpetual comfort of King Casmir. So declared King Dartweg, Casmir's loving friend and trusted ally.

Casmir listened with a small grim smile, then returned a courteous reply, thanking King Dartweg for his interest and wishing him good health. King Dartweg's cooperation would be appreciated, but no final dispositions could be made at the moment.

The courier, his joviality dampened by King Casmir's manner, bowed and departed. King Casmir returned to his contemplations. First things first; and

first was the final expunction of the broken Daut army. This would seem a routine operation of no great difficulty, which King Casmir put into the charge of Prince Cassander.

King Casmir summoned Cassander and told him of the decision. He appended explicit instructions which, in Cassander's ears, made poor hearing: Cassander must carefully heed the counsel of Sir Ettard of Arquimbal, a crafty and experienced warleader. Cassander must also listen to and profit from the counsel of six other senior knights, also of proved competence. Prince Cassander confidently undertook the mission-so confidently, indeed, that

King Casmir once more stipulated that Sir Ettard's advice must be heeded. Prince Cassander grimaced and frowned, but made no protest.

On the following morning Prince Cassander, mounted on a mettlesome black stallion, clad in gilded armour with a scarlet jupon and a gilded helmet flaunting a scarlet plume, led his army into the west. King Casmir settled himself to the reorganization of his new lands. As a first priority, he ordered construction of twelve new shipyards along the Cambermouth, where warships equal or superior to those of Troicinet might be constructed.

Cassander's troops marched westward. The manors and castles of the countryside, during the reign of King Audry, had abandoned whatever military function they might once have served, and offered no resistance, which in any case could only have proved suicidal to the occupants. As Cassander advanced, Audry withdrew: ever westward, gathering reinforcements along the way. Arriving in the Western March, he took his army still further west and out upon the Plain of Shadows. The army of Lyonesse came in close pursuit, never more than a day behind him.

With the Long Dann barring further progress to the west, Audry's options



began to dwindle. His counsellors, notably Claractus, Duke of the March, urged counterattack and at last had their way. They selected the ground with care and took concealment in a north-thrusting salient of the great forest. In the army of Lyonesse, Sir Ettard suspected such an intent and urged Cassander to halt near the village Market Wyrdych, to take local information and to send out scouts, that the Daut army might definitely be located. Sir Ettard had already counseled Cassander to caution on previous occasions and none of his forebodings had come to pass. Cassander, therefore, had come to dislike and distrust Sir Ettard, and blamed him for their failure so far to

come to grips with the Dauts. Cassander was certain that Audry intended to take refuge in the Ulfish highlands behind the Long Dann. There he might well join his forces to the Ulfish armies. Far better, insisted Cassander, that the Dauts be intercepted before they escaped by some secret way over the Long Dann. He refused to delay and ordered his armies forward at best speed.

As Cassander rode past the forest, a line of Daut knights charged from cover, lances leveled. Cassander became aware of drumming hooves; he looked around in startlement to find a knight bearing down on him with lance ominously steady. Cassander tried to

wheel his horse, but in vain; the lance pierced his right shoulder and carried him from his horse, so that he fell heavily on his back, in a confusion of stamping hooves and clambering warriors. An old Daut, face contorted in battle-rage, hacked at Cassander with an axe. Cassander screamed and jerked; the blow sheered the proud crest from his helmet. The Daut yelled in fury and again struck down with his axe; once again Cassander rolled aside, and one of his aides cut through the Daut's neck with a sweep of the sword, so that the spurting blood drenched Cassander where he lay.

King Audry came lunging forward,

swinging his sword back and forth like a man possessed. At his side rode Prince Jaswyn, fighting with equal energy. At their back rode a young herald on a white horse holding high the gray and green standard. The battle swirled in confusion. An arrow pierced Prince Jaswyn's eye; he dropped his sword, clapped his hands to his face, slid slowly from his horse and was dead before he struck the ground. Audry gave a great groan. His head sagged and his sword became listless. Behind him the young herald took an arrow in the chest; the gray and green standard tottered and fell. King Audry called a retreat; the Dauts fell back into the forest.

With Cassander wounded, Sir Ettard assumed command and restrained his forces from pursuit, for fear of the losses which they would surely take from ambush and arrow. Cassander sat on a dead horse, holding his shoulder, his face white and clenched in a dozen emotions: pain, offended dignity, fright to see so much blood, and nausea which caused him to vomit even as Sir Ettard approached.

Sir Ettard stood watching with eyebrows contemptuously arched. Cassander cried out: "What now? Why have we not given pursuit and destroyed the whelps?"

Sir Ettard explained with patience.

"Unless we advanced with the stealth of ferrets, we would lose two for their one. This is both foolish and unnecessary."

"Ai ha!" cried Cassander in pain as one of the heralds tended his wound. "Be easy, I pray you! I still feel the thrust of the lance!" Grimacing, he turned back to Sir Ettard. "We cannot sit here in a stupor! If Audry escapes us, I will be the laughing stock of the court! Go after him, into the forest!"

"As you command."

The Lyonesse army cautiously advanced into the forest, but came upon no Daut resistance. Cassander's dissatisfaction

was compounded by the pulsing pain in his shoulder. He began to curse under his breath. "Where are the skulkers? Why do they not reveal themselves?"

"They do not wish to be killed," said Sir Ettard.

"So it may be, and so they defy my wishes! Have they nested high in the trees?"

"They have probably gone where I suspected they might go."

"And where is that?"

A scout came riding up. "Your Highness,

we have discovered signs of the Dauts! They have fared westward, where the forest gives upon the plain."

"What means that?" cried Cassander in perplexity. "Is Audry bereft that he would invite a new attack?"

"I think not," said Sir Ettard. "While we prowl the forest, peering in nooks and searching the crannies, Audry wins to freedom!"

"How so?" bleated Cassander.

"Across the plain is Poëlitetz! Need I say more?"



Cassander hissed between his teeth.  
"The pain in my shoulder has stopped my thinking. I had forgotten Poëlitetz! Quick, then! Out of the forest!"

Breaking once more out upon the Plain of Shadows, Cassander and Sir Ettard discerned the straggling Daut army already halfway to the scarp. Sir Ettard with his knights and cavalry dashed off in hot pursuit; Cassander, unable to ride at speed, remained with the foot soldiers.

The sally-port of Poëlitetz showed as a dark blot at the base of the Lang Dann; other elements of the fortress, built of native rock, seemed a part of the scarp

itself. Almost in front of Poëlitetz Sir Ettard and his cavalry overtook the Dauts; there was a short sharp skirmish in which King Audry and a dozen of his bravest knights were killed and as many more cut down as they guarded the way into Poëlitetz for the defeated Daut troops.

The portcullis clanged down at last. The Lyonesse cavalry wheeled away to avoid the arrows which were striking down at them from the parapets. On the plain before the scarp sprawled a dismal litter of dead and dying. The portcullis lifted once again. A herald emerged upon the plain carrying a white flag, followed by a dozen warriors. They

circulated among the bodies, giving the coup de grace where needful, to friend and foe alike; and conveying the wounded, again friend and foe alike, into the fortress for such rude treatment as might be practical.

Meanwhile the balance of the Lyonesse army arrived and made camp on the Plain of Shadows, not much more than an arrow's flight from the fortress.

Cassander set up a command pavilion on a hummock directly in front of the portal. At the instigation of Sir Ettard, he called his advisers together for a consultation.

During an hour of discussion, interrupted by Cassander's groans and curses, the

group considered their present condition. All agreed that they had honourably fulfilled their mission and might now return to the east, if that were to be their decision. King Audry lay dead and twisted out on the Plain of Shadows and his army had been reduced to a rabble. But there still remained scope for greater achievement and further glory. Close at hand and seductively vulnerable was North Ulfland. Admittedly the Long Dann barred the way, with the only feasible access guarded by the fortress Poëlitetz.

However, another fact must be taken into account, so one of the group pointed out. The Godelians were now at war against

King Aillas and had in fact invaded North Ulfland. A courier might therefore be sent to King Dartweg, urging him to march south and attack Poëlitetz from its vulnerable rear approaches. If Poëlitetz fell, then both North and South Ulfland lay exposed to the might of the Lyonesse army.

The opportunity seemed too good to ignore, and might well yield victories beyond all King Casmir's expectations. In the end a decision was made to explore the situation. The army built its fires and cooked its evening rations. Sentries were posted and the army composed itself to rest.

Across the eastern edge of the Plain of Shadows the moon rose full. In the commander's pavilion Sir Ettard and his fellows wearily divested themselves of their armour, spread out horse blankets and made themselves as comfortable as might be. Cassander kept to his own tent where he gulped down wine and ate powdered willow bark to dull the throb of his mangled shoulder.

In the morning, Sir Heaulme and three men-at-arms rode north to find King Dartweg, that they might urge his attack upon Poelitetz. During their absence, scouts would explore the face of the Long Dann in the hope of discovering another feasible route up to the high

moors.

In the fortress Poëlitetz the garrison cared for the haggard Daut warriors to the best of their ability, and kept a vigilant watch upon the activities of the Lyonesse troops. A day passed and another. At noon on the third day King Aillas arrived, with a strong contingent of Ulfish troops. His coming was fortuitous. News of King Dartweg's incursion had reached him at Doun Darric and he had assembled a force to deal with the situation. New reports had reached him on the previous day. Dartweg had tried to storm the city Xounges but the defenses had been too much for him, and he veered to the west,

looting and pillaging along the way. At last he arrived at the Ska Foreshore. Disregarding all sanity and prudence the Celts had stormed into Ska territory. Three Ska battalions struck them like thunderbolts, again and again, killing King Dartweg and driving the hysterical survivors back across the North Ulfish moors and into the Skyre. Then, satisfied with their work, the Ska returned to the Foreshore, so that when Aillas arrived at Poëlitetz, the Celtic threat had vanished, and he was free to contemplate the Lyonesse army camped before Poëlitetz.

Aillas walked along the parapets, looking out across the plain to the



Lyonesse camp. He reckoned the number of armoured knights, light and heavy cavalry, pikemen and archers. They considerably overmatched his own forces, both in numbers and in weight of armour, even taking the Dauts into account, and there was no way he could challenge them by a frontal attack.

Aillas thought long and hard. From a grim period long in the past, he remembered a tunnel which had extended from a Poelitz sub-cellar to the hillock on the plain where the Lyonesse commanders had raised their pavilion. Aillas' descended by a route barely recalled into a chamber underneath the marshalling yard. Using a

torch he discovered that the tunnel was as before, and seemed to be in good repair.

Aillas chose a platoon of hard-bitten Ulfish warriors, who cared nothing for the niceties of knightly combat. At midnight the warriors negotiated the tunnel, silently broke open the far exit and crawled out into the open. Keeping to the black shadows, away from the moonlight, they entered the pavilion where the Lyonesse war leaders lay snoring, and' killed them as they slept, including Sir Ettard.

Directly behind the pavilion a paddock constrained the horses of the army. The

raiders killed grooms and sentries, broke open the fences and drove the horses out upon the plain. Then they returned to the tunnel and under the plain to the fortress.

At the first crack of dawn the sally ports at Poëlitetz opened and the Ulfish army, augmented by the surviving Dauts, issued upon the plain, where they formed a battle-line and charged the Lyonesse camp. In the absence of leadership and lacking horses, the Lyonesse army became a chaos of milling men, sleepy and confused, and so was destroyed. Abandoning all order, the fugitives ran eastward, pursued by the vengeful Dauts who showed them no mercy and cut them

down as they ran, including Prince Cassander. The liberated horses were herded together and brought back to the paddock. With captured armour Aillas mounted a new corps of heavy cavalry, and without delay set out to the east.

### III

At Falu Ffail King Casmir received daily dispatches from all quarters of the Elder Isles. For a time he learned nothing to cause him dismay or disturb his sleep. A few situations remained untidy, such as the Ulfish occupation of the Cape Farewell province, but this was only a temporary annoyance and

surely would be remedied in good time.

From the west of Dahaut the news continued good. King Dartweg of Godelia had invaded North Ulfiand, compensating for the Ulfish foray into the Cape Farewell Province. Prince Cassander's great army continued to sweep to the west, smiting the hapless King Audry hip and thigh. According to his last advices, the Dauts had been backed up against the Long Dann and could flee no farther; the end, so it seemed, was in sight.

On the following morning a courier rode up from the south to bring disquieting news: Troice ships had put into the

harbour at Bulmer Skeme; Troice troops had landed and had reduced Spanglemar Castle, and now controlled the city. Further, there was a rumour to the effect that the Troice had already taken Slute Skeme, at the southern terminus of Icniel Way, and in effect controlled the entire Duchy of Folize.

Casmir pounded the table with his fist. This was an intolerable situation, which forced awkward decisions upon him. But there was no help for it: the Troice must be dislodged from the Duchy of Folize. Casmir sent a dispatch to Duke Bannoy, ordering him to augment his army with all the power to be had at Fort Mael: raw recruits and veterans alike.

All must march south into Folize Duchy and expel the Troice.

On the same day that Casmir sent off the dispatch, a courier arrived from the west, with news of the Celtic defeat and the death of King Dartweg, which meant that King Aillas and his Ulfish armies would not be preoccupied doing battle with the Celts.

A day passed, then late in the following afternoon another courier arrived, bringing news of staggering dimension: in a battle beside the Long Dann Prince Cassander had been killed; his great army had been utterly smashed. Of all the proud host only a few hundred still

survived, hiding in ditches, skulking through the forest, hobbling along the back roads disguised as peasant women. Meanwhile, King Aillas with an army of Ulfs and revitalized Dauts marched east at best speed, picking up strength along the way.

Casmir sat slumped for an hour, bewildered by the scope of the disaster. At last he gave a great groan and set himself to doing what needed to be done. All was not yet lost. He sent another courier riding south to Duke Bannoy, ordering him to turn back from Folize Duchy and to march north up Icniel Way, assembling all strength along the way: every knight of Lyonesse capable



of wielding a sword; the training cadres at Fort Mael, the raw levies, and every aging veteran or yeoman competent to wing arrow from bow. Bannoy must bring this makeshift army north at best speed, that it might meet and defeat the armies of King Aillas advancing from the west.

Bannoy, who had been well down Icniel Way toward Slute Skeme, was forced to turn his army about and return the way he had come, with an added hardship: the Troice and Dasce they had been sent south to attack now followed them north, harassing the rear guard with light cavalry. Bannoy was therefore slow in arriving at his rendezvous with

King Casmir, who already had retreated south from Avallon, by reason of King Aillas' proximity.

King Casmir joined Bannoy's army near Lumarth Town and set up camp on a nearby meadow. King Aillas brought up his army with deliberation and established a position at Garland's Green, ten miles west of the Cambermouth and a few miles northwest of Lumarth. Aillas seemed in no hurry to come to grips with King Casmir who, in his turn, felt grateful for the reprieve, since it allowed him better to organize his own forces. Still, with growing perturbation, Casmir wondered as to Aillas' delay; for what might he be

waiting?

The news reached him presently. The Troice and Dasce who had taken Folize Duchy were now at hand, and joining them were the entire might of Pomperol, Blaloc and also the former kingdom of Caduz, which Casmir had assimilated. These were formidable armies, motivated by hatred, and they would fight like men possessed: this Casmir knew. The combined forces moved northward with ominous deliberation, and Aillas' army of Ulfs and Dauts moved toward Lumarth.

Casmir had no choice but to shift his position to avoid entrapment between

the two armies. He ordered a retreat eastward toward the Cambermouth, only to receive news that forty Troice warships and twenty transport cogs had sailed to the head of the Cambermouth and there had discharged a great force of Troice and Dasce heavy infantry, supported by four hundred archers from Scola, so that armies now moved upon Casmir from three directions.

In a tactic of desperation Casmir ordered full and vehement assault upon Aillas' army, which was closest at hand, and included components of the Daut warriors whom he had already chased the width of Dahaut. The two armies met on a stony field known as Breedknock

Barrens. Casmir's warriors knew themselves to be fighting a lost cause, and their assault was listless, almost tentative, and was at once thrown back on itself. The other two armies now appeared and Casmir found himself pressed from three directions, and he realized that the day was lost. Many of his untried troops were slaughtered in the first ten minutes; many surrendered; many fled the field, including King Casmir. With a small troop of high-ranking knights, squires and men-at-arms he broke through the battle-lines and fled to the south. His only hope now was to arrive in Lyonesse Town where he would commandeer a fishing vessel and attempt the passage to Aquitaine.

Casmir and his comrades outdistanced pursuit, and in due course rode unchallenged down the Sfer Arct into Lyonesse Town.

At the King's Parade, Casmir turned aside toward Haidion, where he met a final bitter surprise: Troice troops commanded by Sir Yane. They had overcome the weakened garrison several days before and now occupied the city. Casmir was unceremoniously clapped into shackles and taken to the Peinhador, where he was confined in the deepest and dankest of the thirty-three dungeons, and there left to brood upon the vicissitudes of life and the unpredictable

directions of Destiny.

## IV

The Elder Isles were quiet, in the torpor of exhaustion, grief and satiated emotion. Casmir huddled in a dungeon from which Aillas was in no hurry to extricate him. One frosty winter morning Casmir would be brought up and led to the block behind the Peinhador; there his head would be detached from his torso by the axe of Zerling, his own executioner, who, for the nonce, also occupied a dungeon. Other prisoners, depending upon their offenses, had been liberated or returned to the Peinhador, pending

more careful judgment. Queen Sollace had been put aboard a ship and exiled to Benwick in Armorica. In her baggage she carried an antique blue chalice, double-handled, with a chipped rim, upon which she lavished a great devotion. It remained in her custody for several years, then was stolen, causing her such distress that she refused to eat or drink and presently died.

When the Troice took Lyonesse Town, Father Umphred went into hiding, using the cellars under the new cathedral for his lair. Upon the departure of Queen Sollace he became desperate and decided to follow. Early one gray and blustery morning he took himself aboard



a fishing vessel, and paid the fisherman three gold pieces for passage to Aquitaine. Yane, at Aillas' instructions, had been seeking Umphred high and low, and had been waiting for just such an occasion. He took note of the priest's furtive embarkation and notified Aillas. The two boarded a fast galley and set off in pursuit. Ten miles to sea they overtook the fishing vessel, and sent aboard a pair of stalwart seamen. In sad-eyed dismay Umphred saw them come, but managed a nervous little wave of the fingers and a smile. He called: "This is a pleasant surprise!"

The two seamen brought Father Umphred aboard the galley. "Truly, this

is all a nuisance," said Father Umphred. "I am delayed in my travels and you must suffer the bite of this brisk sea air."

Aillas and Yane looked around the deck, while Umphred volubly explained the reason for his presence on the fishing boat. "My work is done in the Elder Isles! I have achieved wonderful things but now I must move on!"

Yane tied a rope to a stone anchor. Umphred spoke more feelingly than ever. "I have been guided by divine instruction! There have been signs in the sky, and prodigies known only to me! The voices of angels have spoken into my ears!"

Yane coiled the rope, and cleared it of kinks that it might run freely.

Umphred spoke on. "My good works have been manifold! Often I recall how I cherished the Princess Suldrun and assisted her in her hour of need!"

Yane tied the end of the rope around Umphred's neck.

Umphred's words tumbled over each other. "My work has not gone unnoticed! Signals from above have beckoned me onward, that I may achieve new victories in the name of the Faith!"

A pair of seamen lifted the anchor and

carried it to the rail. Umphred's voice rose in pitch. "Henceforth I will be a pilgrim! I will live like a bird of the wild, in poverty and abstention!"

Yane thoughtfully cut away Umphred's pouch, and looking within discovered the glitter of gold and jewels. "Wherever you are going, you surely will not need so much wealth."

Aillas looked around the sky. "Priest, it is a cold day for your swim, but so it must be." He stood back. Yane pushed the anchor overboard. The rope snapped taut, jerking Umphred across the deck in a stumbling run. He clawed at the rail, but his fingers slipped; the rope pulled

him over the side. He struck the water with a splash and was gone.

Aillas and Yane returned to Lyonesse Town and spoke no more of Father Umphred.

## V

Aillas summoned the grandees of the Elder Isles to Haidion. At an assembly in the monumental old Hall of Justice he issued a proclamation. "My heart is too full to speak at length," said Aillas. "I will be brief, and you will hear my message in simple words-though the concepts and their consequences are large.

"At the cost of blood, pain and woe beyond reckoning, the Elder Isles are at peace and, in practical terms, united under a single rule: my own. I am resolved that this condition shall continue and remain in force forever, or at least so far as the mind can project into the future.

"I am now King of the Elder Isles. Kestrel of Pomperol and Milo of Blaloc must henceforth use the title 'Grand Duke'. Once again Godelia becomes the Province of Fer Aquila, and there will be many reapportionments. The Ska will remain independent on Skaghane and the Foreshore; that is the force of our treaty.

"We shall maintain a single army, which need not be large, since our navy will guard us against attack from abroad. There will be one code of law: the same justice will apply to high and low alike, without regard for birth or wealth."

Aillas looked around the hall. "Does any person protest or make complaint? Let him air his feelings now; though I warn him that all arguments in favor of the old ways will go for naught."

No one spoke.

Aillas proceeded. "I shall rule not from Miraldra, which is too remote, nor from Falu Ffail, which is too splendid, nor yet

from Haidion, which is haunted by too many memories. I shall undertake a new capitol at Flerency Court near the village Tat willow, where Old Street meets Icniel Way. This place shall be known as 'Alcyone', and here I shall sit on the throne Evandig and dine with my faithful paladins at Cairbra an Meadhan, and my son Dhrun after me, and his son after him, and so shall there be peace and kindness throughout the Elder Isles, and neither man nor woman will ever claim that he or she lacked recourse for wrongs done to him or to her."

## VI



Castle Miraldra at Domreis could no longer serve Aillas as his seat of government. Haidion, where he had set up a temporary residence, oppressed him by reason of its melancholy associations and he was resolved to move, as quickly as convenient, to Ronart Cinquelon, near the site of his new palace Alcyone at Flerency Court.

To assist in the organization of his government, he transported his council of ministers from Domreis to Lyonesse Town aboard the galleass Flor Velas. Madouc, feeling lonely and neglected at dank old Castle Miraldra, took herself uninvited aboard the vessel, and arrived with the others at Lyonesse Town. The

counsellors were met by carriages for their immediate journey to Ronart Cinquelon. Madouc found herself standing alone on the docks. "If that is the way of it, so it must be," said Madouc to herself and set off on foot up the Sfer Arct.

Castle Haidion loomed above her: massive, gray and cheerless. Madouc climbed the steps to the terrace and crossed to the front portal. The men-at-arms on guard duty now wore the black and ocher of Troicinet, instead of Lyonesse lavender and green. As she approached they thumped the butts of their halberds smartly down upon the stone by way of salute, and one opened

the heavy door for her; otherwise they paid her no heed.

The reception hall was empty. Haidion seemed only the husk of its old self, though the domestic staff, lacking orders to the contrary, unobtrusively went about its usual duties. From a footman Madouc learned that both Aillas and Dhrun were absent from the premises, but where they had gone and when they would return the footman could not say.

In the absence of a better arrangement, Madouc went to her old chambers, which smelled musty from disuse. She threw wide the shutters to admit light and air, then looked about the room. It

seemed a place remembered from a dream.

Madouc had brought no baggage from Castle Miraldra. In the wardrobe she found garments she had left behind, but marvelled to discover how small and tight they had become. She gave a laugh of sad amusement which left an ache in her throat. "I have changed!" she told herself. "Oh how I have changed!" She stood back and surveyed the room. "Whatever happened to that long-legged little wretch who lived in this place and looked from yonder window and wore these clothes?"

Madouc went out into the hall and

summoned a maid, who recognized her and began lamenting the tragic changes which had overtaken the palace. Madouc quickly lost patience with the recital. "It is clearly all for the best! You are lucky to be alive, with a roof over your head, since many are dead, or homeless, or both! Now go fetch the seamstresses, since I have no clothes to wear! Then I wish to bathe, so bring me warm water and good soap!"

From the seamstresses Madouc learned why Aillas and Dhrun were away from Haidion: they had gone to Watershade on Troicinet, where Glyneth was close upon her time.

The days passed pleasantly enough. Madouc was fitted with a dozen pretty new gowns. She renewed her acquaintance with Kerce the librarian, who had remained at Haidion, along with a small number of courtiers and their ladies who, for one reason or another, had been granted residence and now had no other place to go. Among those who lingered at the court were three of the maidens who at one time had attended Madouc: Devonet of the long golden hair, pretty Ydrait, and Felice. At first the three kept themselves warily apart; then, perceiving the possibility of advantage, began to make themselves agreeable, despite the lack of any

responsive cordiality from Madouc.

Devonet was especially persistent and sought to remind Madouc of old times.

"Those were truly wonderful days! And now they are gone forever!"

"What 'wonderful days' are these?" asked Madouc.

"Don't you remember? We had such glorious fun together!"

"You had glorious fun calling me bastard, I remember that well enough. I was not all that amused."

Devonet giggled and looked aside. "It

was just a silly game, and no one took it seriously."

"Of course not, since no one was called bastard but me, and I ignored you, for the most part."

Devonet heaved a sigh of relief. "I am happy to hear you say so, since I hope to find a place in the new court."

"Small chance of that," said Madouc briskly. "You may call me bastard again if you like."

Devonet put her hands to her mouth in horror: "I would never think to be so rude, now that I know better!"



"Why not?" asked Madouc reasonably.  
"Truth is truth."

Devonet blinked, trying to grasp not only the sense but also the overtones of Madouc's remarks. She asked cautiously: "So you never learned the name of your father?"

"I learned his name, well enough. He announced himself to my mother as Sir Pellinore, but unless they undertook marriage vows at almost the same instant they met-and my mother does not remember such a ceremony-I am still a bastard."

"What a pity, after all your longing for a

pedigree and respectable lineage!"

Madouc sighed. "I have stopped caring about such things, since they are not to be mine. Sir Pellinore may still exist, but I suspect that I shall never know him."

"You need not grieve!" declared Devonet, "since now I will be your dear friend!"

"Excuse me," said Madouc. "I am reminded of an errand I have neglected."

Madouc went around to the stables to search out Sir Pom-Pom, only to learn that he had been killed in the battle at Breeknock Barrens. Madouc slowly

returned to the castle, musing as she went. "The world now lacks a 'Sir Pom-Pom', with all his funny ways! I wonder where he is now? Or is he anywhere at all? Can someone be nowhere?" She pondered the matter an hour or more, but could find no decisive answer to the question.

Late in the afternoon Madouc discovered to her delight that Shimrod had arrived at Haidion. He had been with Aillas and Dhrun at Watershade, and brought news that Glyneth had borne a baby girl, the Princess Serle. He reported that Aillas and Dhrun would return by ship in a day or two; Glyneth would remain at Watershade for yet another month.

"I have no patience for travelling either by horse or by ship," said Shimrod.

"When I discovered that you had come to Haidion I decided on the instant to join you and the next instant I was here."

"I am happy that you are here," said Madouc. "Although, if the truth be known, I have almost enjoyed the time alone."

"How have you been occupying yourself?"

"The days go by quickly. I visit the library, where I confer with Kerce the librarian and read books. Once I went up the cloisters, through Zoltra Bright-Star's

Gate and out on the Urquial. I went close to the Peinhador, so that when I looked at the ground I could imagine King Casmir sitting deep below me in the dark. The thought made me feel strange. I went back across the Urquial and pushed through the old gate so that I could look into Suldrun's garden, but I did not go down the path; the garden is far too quiet. Today I went out to the stables, and I found that poor Sir Pom-Pom had been killed in Dahaut and now is dead. I can hardly believe it, since he was so full of foolishness. His life barely got started before it was done."

"Once I spoke along similar lines to Murgen," said Shimrod. "His response

was not exactly to the point, and it puzzles me to this day-to some extent, at least."

"What did he say?"

"First he leaned back in his chair and looked into the fire. Then he said: 'Life is a peculiar commodity, with dimensions of its own. Still, if you were to live a million years, engaged in continual pleasures of mind, spirit and body; so that every day you discovered a new delight, or solved an antique puzzle, or overcame a challenge; even a single hour wasted in torpor, somnolence or passivity would be as reprehensible as if the fault were committed by an

ordinary person, with scanty years to his life.'

"Hm," said Madouc. "He gave you no exact information, or so it seems to me."

"This was my own feeling," said Shimrod. "However, I did not assert as much to Murgan."

Madouc said thoughtfully: "It might be that he was confused by your question and gave the first answer that entered his mind."

"Possibly so. You are a clever girl, Madouc! I will now consider the matter an insoluble mystery and dismiss it from

my mind."

Madouc sighed. "I wish I could do the same."

"What mysteries trouble you so seriously?"

"First is the mystery of where I will live. I do not care to stay at Haidion. Miraldra is too cold and misty and too far. Watersshade is peaceful and beautiful, but nothing ever happens and I would soon become lonely."

"At Trilda I too am often lonely," said Shimrod. "I invite you, therefore, to visit me at Trilda, where you shall stay as



long as you like-certainly until Aillas builds his palace Alcyone. Dhrun would come often to join us and you surely would not be lonely."

Madouc could not restrain a cry of excitement. "Would you teach me magic?"

"As much as you cared to learn. It is not easy, and in fact surpasses the ability of most folk who try."

"I would work hard! I might even become useful to you!"

"Who knows? It is possible!"

Madouc threw her arms around Shimrod.  
"At least I feel as if I have a home!"

"Then it is settled."

On the next day Aillas and Dhrun returned to Lyonesse Town, and immediately all departed Haidion. Shimrod and Madouc would turn off Old Street at Tawn Twillett and ride north to Trilda; Aillas and Dhrun would proceed along Old Street to Tatwillow and Castle Ronart Cinquelon.

Along the way the group came to Sarris, where Aillas chose to sojourn for two or three days of banqueting, good-fellowship and irresponsibility. Dhrun

and Madouc wandered out on the lawn which sloped down to the River Glame. In the shade of a great oak with wide-sprawling branches they paused. Dhrun asked: "Do you remember how you hid behind this very tree to escape the attention of poor Prince Bittern?"

"I remember very well. You must have thought me a very strange creature to go to such lengths."

Dhrun shook his head. "I thought you amusing and altogether remarkable-as I do now."

"More now than then, or less?"

Dhrun took her hands. "Now you are begging for compliments."

Madouc looked up at him. "But you still haven't told me-and I value your compliments."

Dhrun laughed. "More, of course! When you look up at me with your blue eyes I become weak."

Madouc held up her face. "All this being the case, you may kiss me."

Dhrun kissed her. "I thank you for your permission, although I was about to kiss you anyway."

"Dhrun! You frighten me with your savage lust!"

"Do I indeed?" Dhrun kissed her again, and again. Madouc stood back, breathing hard.

"Now then," said Dhrun. "What of that?"

"I cannot understand why I feel so odd."

"I think I know," said Dhrun. "But there is no time to explain now, since the footman is coming to call us." He turned to leave, but waited as Madouc knelt beside the oak. Dhrun asked: "What are you doing?"

"There is someone missing. She should be here."

"Who might that be?"

"My mother, Twisk! It is my duty as a daughter to invite her to an occasion so merry!"

"Do you think she will come?"

"I will call her." Madouc selected a blade of grass and made a grass flute. She played a piping note and sang:

'Lirra lissa larra lass

Madouc has made a flute of grass.

Softly blowing, wild and free

She calls to Twisk at Thripsey Shee,

Lirra lissa larra leer

A daughter calls her mother dear!

Tread the wind and vault the mere;

Span the sky and meet me here.

So sing I, Madouc.'

In a swirl of vapor Twisk appeared. Her delicate features were placid, her blue hair coiffed into a crest along the top of her scalp and engaged in a silver mesh.

Madouc cried out in delight: "Mother, you are more beautiful than ever! I marvel at you!"

Twisk smiled with cool amusement. "I am pleased to merit your approval. Dhrun, I must say that you present yourself most agreeably. Your early training has served you well."

"So it may be," said Dhrun politely. "I shall never forget it, certainly."

Twisk turned back to Madouc. "Our compliments have been exchanged; what was your purpose in calling me?"

"I wanted you, my dear mother, on hand



to share our merriment at a banquet, which even now is about to begin. It is a small but select occasion, and we will take pleasure in your company."

Twisk shrugged. "Why not? I have nothing better to do."

"Hmf," said Madouc. "Enthusiasm or none, I am still pleased! Come, we have already been called to the table!"

"I will naturally avoid the gut-clogging impact of your coarse food; still, I may taste a drop of wine and perhaps the wing of a quail. Who is that handsome gentleman?"

"That is King Aillas. Come, I will introduce you."

The three strolled across the lawn to where the table had been laid with-linen napery and salvers of silver. Aillas, in conversation with one of his escort, turned to watch the three approach.

Madouc said: "Your Highness, allow me to present my mother, Twisk, often known as 'Twisk of the Blue Hair'. I have invited her to share our banquet."

Aillas bowed. "Lady Twisk, you are more than welcome!" He looked from Twisk to Madouc and back to Twisk. "I think I see a resemblance, though

certainly not in the color of the hair!"

"Madouc's hair was perhaps the only birthright rendered her by her father, a certain Sir Pellinore, of frivolous bent."

Shimrod approached the group. Madouc called out: "Mother, I would like to present another of my dear friends!"

Twisk turned, and her blue eyebrows lofted high. "So, Sir Pellinore! At last you choose to show yourself! Have you no shame?" Twisk turned to Madouc. "I advise more caution in the choice of your friends! This is the secretive Sir Pellinore, your father!"

Madouc gave a poignant cry: "I can choose my friends, Mother, but as for my father, the choice was yours!"

"True," said Twisk equably. "Indeed, it was from Sir Pellinore that I learned the caution I am now trying to teach you."

Madouc turned to Shimrod. "Are you truly Sir Pellinore?"

Shimrod attempted an airy gesture.

"Many years ago, I wandered the land as a vagabond. It is true I occasionally used the name Sir Pellinore when the mood came upon me. And, indeed, I remember an idyll in the forest with a beautiful fairy, when I thought the name Sir

Pellinore rang with romantic reverberations-far more than simple 'Shimrod'."

"So it is true! You, Shimrod, are my father!"

"If the Lady Twisk so asserts, I shall be honoured to claim the relationship. I am as surprised as you, but not at all displeased!"

Aillas spoke: "Let us take our places at the table! Our goblets are full with wine! Madouc has found her father; Shimrod has found a daughter, and the family is now united!"

"Not for long," said Twisk. "I have no taste for maudlin domesticity."

"Still, you must acknowledge the moment. To the table then, and we will celebrate Lady Twisk's surprising disclosures!"

"First: we shall salute my absent queen Glyneth and the new Princess Serle!"

"Second: to the Lady Twisk, who astounds us with her beauty!"

"Third: to Madouc, one-time Princess of Lyonesse, who became demoted to 'Madouc the vagabond', and now by royal dispensation becomes once again:

Madouc, Princess of Lyonesse!"

# Footnotes

1 In primaeval times a land bridge briefly connected the Elder Isles to Old Europe. According to myth, the first nomad hunters to arrive on Hybras, when they crossed the Teach tac Teach and looked down along the Atlantic foreshore, discovered the city Ys.

2 Somewhat later, King Phristan of Lyonesse allowed a Christian bishopric at Bulmer Skeme, on the east coast of Lyonesse, insisting only that no wealth be exported to Rome. Perhaps for this reason, the church received little support from abroad, and the bishop exercised



no great influence, either at Bulmer Skeme or at Rome.

3 In years to come Cairbra an Meadhan would serve as model for the Round Table which graced King Arthur's court at Camelot.

4 Also known as the Hall of Heroes, where Evandig the throne and Cairbra an Meadhan the round table are situated.

5 Also Known as the Old Tower.

6 Known as the Eyrie.

7 Jousting in full armour with battle lances was not yet in vogue. During this

era lances were heavily padded with pillowlike buffs, and jousting seldom caused injuries more serious than bruises and sprains.

8 Sir Blaise would eventually sire Sir Glahan of Benwick, who in his turn would sire one of King Arthur's best paladins, Sir Lancelot du Lac. Also present at the celebration was Sir Garstang of Twanbow Hall, whose son would sire another of King Arthur's most trusted comrades, Sir Tristram of Lyonesse.

9 Ska: the indigenous race of Scandinavia, with traditions and records older by far than those of the Near or Far

East. Three thousand years previously, a wave of Aryans, or Ur-Goths, had migrated north from the Black Sea steppes into Scandanavia, ultimately expelling the Ska, who descended first upon Ireland, where they were known to myth as the 'Sons of Partholon'. Eventually, after defeat by the Danaans, they migrated south into Skaghane.

10 Saint Uldine's children were Ignaldus, Drathe, Alleia and Bazille. Each survived to pursue his or her destiny. The chronicles relating to these events may someday be made public.

11 NOTE: The honorific 'Sir' is here used to designate persons born to noble

estate, without reference to their place in the exactly gradated hierarchy. The contemporary language uses a multiplicity of titles and honorifics to specify each subtle distinction; these would be impractical to render in the present chronicle. Hence 'Sir Cory' is designated by the same honorific as his father, the landed baron 'Sir Claunay', and his brother, 'Sir Camwyd', even though their absolute ranks are greatly at variance.

**12** bodge: an outdoor lathe powered by a line running from a springy overhead tree branch to a treadle which turns the spindles of the lathe.

13 Untranslatable: a fairy word signifying (1) passionate receptivity or involvement with each instant of life; (2) a kind of euphoria induced by close attention to unpredictable changes in the perceived surroundings as one instant metamorphoses into the next; a dedicated awareness to NOW; a sensitivity to the various elements of NOW. The concept of skiemik is relatively simple and quite bereft of mysticism or symbol.

14 Lucanor's duties were three: he plotted the shape of the constellations and, when needful, altered the placement of the stars; he assigned to each thing of the world the secret name by which its existence was confirmed or denied; he

regulated the cycle by which the end of the future merged into the beginning of the past. In Druidic depictions, Lucanor wore double-pointed shoes, with toes extending both forward and back. An iron circlet displaying seven golden disks clasped his head. Lucanor was a solitary god, who held himself aloof from the lesser gods of the Druidic pantheon, among whom he inspired awe and fear.

A Druidic myth relates how Lucanor, coming upon the other gods as they sat at the banquet table, found them drinking mead in grand style, to the effect that several were drunk, while others remained inexplicably sober; could

some be slyly swilling down more than their share? The disparity led to bickering, and it seemed that a serious quarrel was brewing. Lucanor bade the group to serenity, stating that the controversy no doubt could be settled without recourse either to blows or to bitterness. Then and there Lucanor formulated the concept of numbers and enumeration, which heretofore had not existed. The gods henceforth could tally with precision the number of horns each had consumed and, by this novel method, assure general equity and, further, explain why some were drunk and others not. "The answer, once the new method is mastered, becomes simple!" explained Lucanor. "It is that the drunken

gods have taken a greater number of horns than the sober gods, and the mystery is resolved.” For this, the invention of mathematics, Lucanor was given great honour.