

ST. GEORGE AND THE WITCHES

BY J. W. DUNNE



ILLUSTRATED BY LLOYD COE

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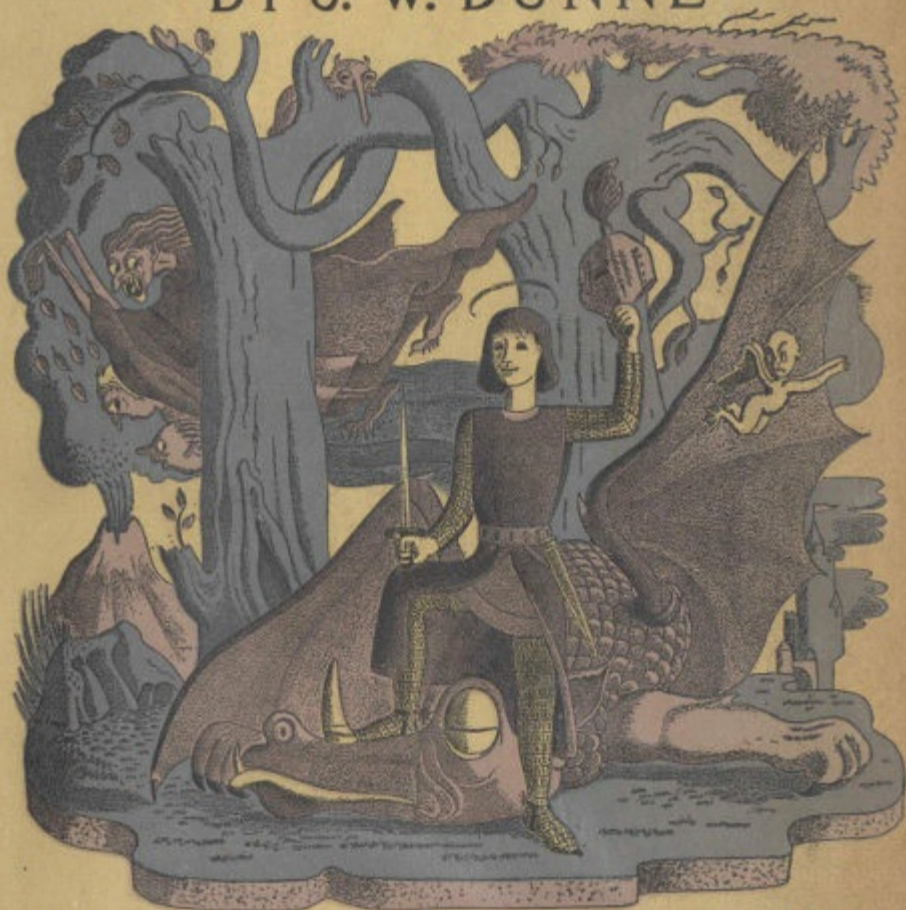
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BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

There was a clatter of racing feet on the ancient, oaken stairs. There followed, apparently, a wrestling match outside my door. Then the two entered, paused, advanced and greeted me sedately.

“Well, what shall we play tonight?” I asked.

“St. George and the Dragon,” said Rosemary.

“But we did that yesterday,” I objected.

“Well, go on with it,” said Christopher.

“But we *finished* St. George and the Dragon. You killed the Dragon, and you married the Princess [which is not in the real story]. There isn’t any more to go on with.”

“Well, they can have adventures after they are married, can’t they?” said Christopher.

“Oh!” said I, and paused to take this in. “Oh, very well.”

That was how it all began; but, when the story came to be written out, the children were old enough to render advisable a change of diction and an amplification of the plot.

The joyous liberties we took with history; the geography we molded to our desire; the demonology we modified to suit our needs: these, of necessity, remain. All said and done, the tale's the thing.

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ST. GEORGE AND THE WITCHES

Chapter I

AN ARTIST SPEAKS OF HIS ART

When St. George, mounted upon his great war horse, rode toward the dragon, the Princess Cleodolinda closed her eyes. Then she opened them again; because she felt that she simply must have one more look at this knight before he was turned into a cinder. She wanted to remember his face. The fact that she, probably, would be chewed up by the dragon two minutes later seemed merely to make it more important that she should get that face fixed quite clearly in her mind. She was a brave girl, or she would not—you will remember—have been there at all.

Well, when she opened her eyes, she saw a most surprising thing. St. George had dismounted and was strolling—yes, *strolling*—toward the dragon, with nothing but a long, thin dagger in his hand. The brute was watching him in a slightly puzzled fashion, and little wisps of acrid smoke curled upward from its nostrils as it waited. St. George drew nearer, and suddenly the dragon opened its enormous jaws. At that, the Princess shut her eyes very tightly indeed. She heard a slight scuffling noise and a thud.

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And then, to her joy and amazement, she heard the Knight say, “It is all right, my pretty. Open your eyes. The beast is

dead.”

She looked, and there was St. George smiling at her from the other side of the prone monster. She wanted to cry “Oh! thank Heaven! thank Heaven!” but she knew that princesses must not be emotional. So, all that she did say, gravely, was “You have no right, sir, to call me your ‘pretty’ just because you have killed a dragon.”

At that St. George laughed (it made her think, somehow, of the sun sparkling on a running brook) and he cried, “Then I will call you ‘my pretty’ just because you are pretty, and because I hope you will be mine.” And he jumped over the dragon, and cut her bonds with his dagger, and then kneeled and kissed her hand. And when he looked up, and she, bending forward, looked down into his upturned face, the gravity left her lips, and her smile made him think, somehow, of stars in an evening sky when the wind blows away dark mists that are like, in some fashion, the veil of a damsel’s long hair drooping round a kneeling knight. And then they both forgot all about the dragon.

But, after they were married—(What! didn’t you know that they were married three days later? Someone must have told you the story all wrong.) After they were married, the Princess remembered; and she said, “Tell me, St. George, how *did* you manage to kill that dragon?”

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Her father, the King of Silene (the Princess had invited them both to her private boudoir to taste a strange new beverage called “tea”), echoed her question. “Come, tell us,” he said. “There is nobody here but we three, and modesty, you know,

can be overdone.”

St. George laughed. “The truest modesty, sire,” he replied, “would be for me to tell you precisely how it happened; for I fear that you will think less highly of me when you learn how easy was the deed. You see—” he paused for a moment. “But, perhaps,” he went on, “it would be simpler if I told you the story from the beginning.”

The Princess clapped her hands. “Yes, please do so,” she cried. “I simply love stories, especially when they are true. But first, will you not each have another cup of my tea? Did I tell you that it was sent to me as a birthday present by my great-uncle, the Emperor of China? It was on the last birthday—my sixteenth.”

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She poured out three more cups of tea, and then St. George began.

“When I was young,” he said—but here the King interrupted.

“Young?” he cried. “I thought you told me that you had just passed twenty-three.”

“That is true,” replied St. George, “but at the time of which I am going to speak I was only eighteen.”

“Oh, ah! I see,” said the King. He had been sixty-five at *his* last birthday.

“When I was young,” repeated St. George firmly, “I happened to be walking in a wood. I was stepping very quietly, because I was hunting for rabbits. Suddenly, I saw a sort of heaving

movement in a patch of bracken a little way ahead; and looking more closely, I perceived that the bracken partly concealed the body of a long green dragon. Smoke was rising lightly from its nostrils, making a faint blue haze above the fronds; so the beast was, clearly, one of the fire-breathing kind. They are very rare indeed; but I do not know why.”

“I do,” said the King unexpectedly.

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“Why?” asked the Princess and St. George, speaking together.

“I will tell you afterwards,” replied the King. “Go on with your story now.”

“The beast did not notice me,” continued St. George, “because it lay sideways to me, with its head pointing to my right, and its gaze fixed intently upon some object in front of it. Just as I realized this, I heard a loud bellow, and glancing in the direction toward which the dragon was looking, I saw a large white bull trotting toward the monster with his head held high in the air. It was clear to me that he had scented the dragon; and that, with all the reckless stupidity of his kind, he was advancing toward the place where he smelled danger.

“The dragon lay motionless until the bull had come to within fifteen paces of its head, and then it opened its mouth to its widest stretch. Now, its lower jaw lay along the ground, so it managed the opening by bending its head backward and raising the upper jaw. As it did so it drew a long, deep breath—I could see its ribs swelling with the effort—and, meanwhile, it closed its eyes. If you will hold your lower jaw, throw your head back so as to open your mouth, and draw a

deep breath, you will find that the tendency to close your eyes is so natural that it requires a distinct effort to keep them open.”

The King tried this. The Princess did not do so. “Yes,” said the King, “I see what you mean.”

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“I realized, at once,” continued St. George, “that, while the monster was engaged in this operation, there would be time for a swift and active man to leap forward to the side of the brute’s head, without being seen.”

“But, surely,” gasped the Princess, “that would be horribly dangerous.”

“Much less dangerous than it sounds,” replied St. George, “but the bull, of course, made no such agile side-leap. He just lowered his head, rushed straight in, and was met by a blast of flame so bright and blinding that I was, for the moment, completely dazzled. Then I saw that the poor, foolish beast was lying in a heap on the ground, and noticed that the air was filled with a delicious aroma of roast beef. The dragon licked its lips and advanced to its meal. I dropped to the ground, and squirmed away backward, nor did I rise until I could do so without danger of being seen.

“On my way home I pondered deeply upon what I had observed. It was easy enough to understand why the dragon had opened its mouth and drawn that deep breath. The fires within it were merely smoldering, and the inrush of air was needed to blow them to a blaze. Evidently, all fire-breathing dragons would have to do this before they could

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shoot out the blast which should shrivel their enemies. Evidently, also, they would close their eyes during this preparatory action. Therefore, as I said before, an active man should find no difficulty in arriving uninjured beside the monster's neck. But what was he to do when he got there? You cannot pierce a dragon's brazen scales with a sword, you know."

"But," interrupted the King. He paused. "Never mind, go on."

"Then," continued St. George, "I had what one might call a wave of activity in whatever it is one thinks with." He looked at them doubtfully. "I am afraid," he said, "that I am not making myself very clear."

"On the contrary," replied the King, "the description is most lucid, though rather too long, perhaps, for use in everyday conversation. You see what he means, do you not, princess?"

"I think so," said Cleodolinda, frowning slightly.

"Well," said St. George, "this is what came to me in a flash of thought: Scales overlap, you know. Those in front lie half over those which are next behind them. So, when you poke at a dragon from its front, your lance point or sword point merely slides along the scale it strikes first and slips over the back end of this onto the middle of the scale next behind. In this way your thrust might glance along the whole length of the beast's body without ever finding a crevice through which it could enter. But, if you were to thrust against those scales, striking forward from behind, your point would slip over the scale you struck and then slip in under the back

edge of the scale next in front. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes," cried the Princess, "but . . ." Then she, in her turn, paused.

St. George waited; then, as she said no more, he went on. He had risen, and drew his dagger in order to show better what he meant. "Now, I," he cried, "would be beside the monster's neck, facing its tail. If I were to stab with a backward stroke, my point would slip in under the scales; and, if I aimed correctly, it would pass on into the brute's brain through the soft place underneath the back of the skull."

"Mind the teapot!" cried the Princess.

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"I beg your pardon," said St. George. He replaced his dagger in its sheath, and continued his story.

"Next day the usual news was being proclaimed by heralds throughout the town. The dragon, following custom, had demanded the King's daughter for a meal, this being the price of his departure; and the King (so said the heralds) out of his great love for his people had decided to sacrifice his fair child. But, of course, one-half of the kingdom, together with the lady's hand in marriage, were offered to any knight who might save the girl by slaying the monster."

"What king was that?" asked Cleodolinda.

"The country was called 'Etheria,'" answered St. George, "but I am afraid that I cannot tell you exactly where it is. I was traveling on the Continent at the time, and my knowledge of geography is rather weak."

“Well,” said the Princess, “did you offer your services as a rescuer?”

“No,” said St. George. “Knights only were asked for, and I was no knight then. But I armed myself with a long, thin dagger, which I concealed in my sleeve; and I followed the procession which led the Princess to the place of sacrifice in the forest. She wore, I may say, a heavy veil. When the others had departed I hid behind a tree.”

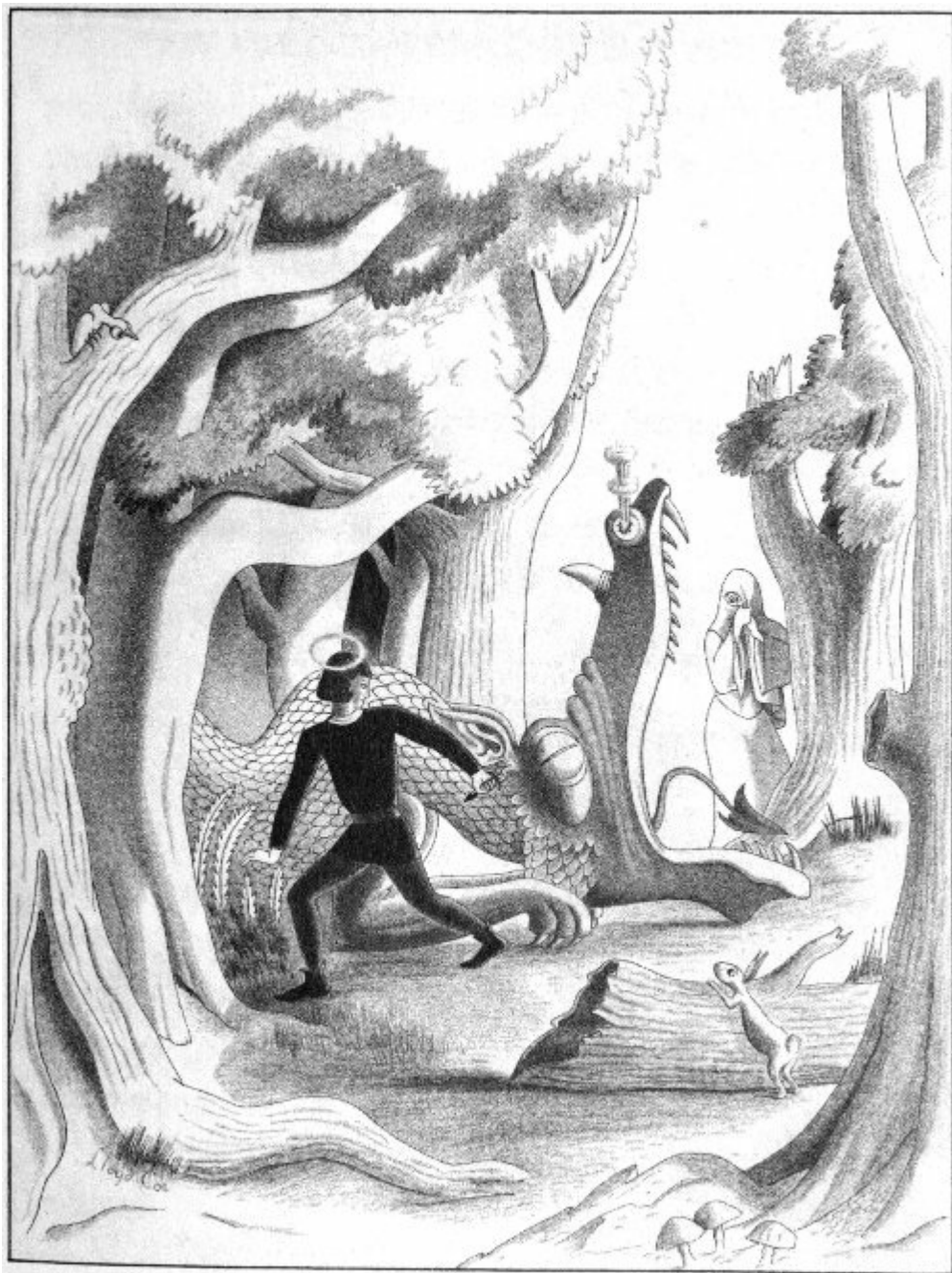
“Go on,” said the King, as St. George hesitated.

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“I do not know, really, if I ought to tell you this,” confessed the young man, “but, having gone thus far, I do not see how I can stop. . . . From the first, then, I had my doubts about that princess. The girl did not go at all willingly, as would have befitted one of royal rank, and after they had left her she did rather a lot of weeping and wailing. I was so puzzled at her behavior that, watching her, I failed to notice the approach of the dragon. The brute slithered up with surprising quietness, and suddenly poked its head out of the bracken. Then it spoke to the girl in a voice like the sound of a creaking windmill. ‘Who are you?’ it demanded.

“‘Oh! lawks-a-mussy-on-me!’ she screamed. ‘Garn away, ye nasty ugly critter!’

“Then, of course, I saw the truth—and so did the monster. ‘Where’s that king?’ it bellowed. ‘I’ll teach him to deceive a dragon!’



“It swung round away from the girl; and at that moment I stepped from behind my tree and walked slowly toward it—

slowly, because I wanted the beast to misjudge my pace. It crouched immediately, resting its head on its forepaws and arching its neck; watching me the while with unwavering green eyes. It allowed me to stroll to within ten feet of it before it performed the movement I was expecting. Then, as the upper part of its head went back and its eyes closed, I stepped to the left and sprang in.”

“And then?” cried the King and the Princess together, both leaning forward.

“Oh,” said St. George, “the theory worked out perfectly. The dagger penetrated the brain, and the brute was dead before ever it had finished drawing that deep breath.”

“And what did you say to the girl afterwards?” asked the Princess. She asked it rather anxiously.

“Well, you see,” replied St. George ruefully, “she was fat as a pudding, and she kept up a continuous squalling. Testing new theories is always rather trying work, and I am afraid I rather snapped at her. What I said, actually, was, ‘For goodness’ sake, girl, stop that blubbering! Nothing is going to eat *you*.’”

“Oh!” said the Princess. She looked, for some reason, relieved.

“But, I suppose,” she went on, “that you have saved lots of damsels since then?”

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St. George counted on his fingers. “Six, I believe,” he said.

“And did they,” inquired the Princess, “all (what was the

word you used?) ‘blubber’?”

“All except one,” said the Knight. He sighed reminiscently. “She,” he added, “was a dream of beauty.”

“What did she do?” asked the Princess, quickly.

“She just looked at me,” replied St. George, “and said, very gravely, ‘You have no right, sir, to call me your “pretty” just because—’”

“Oh!” cried the Princess. She blushed. Then she smiled at St. George.

“Well, go on with the story,” said the King impatiently, after waiting nearly a minute.

“I beg your pardon,” apologized St. George. “But there is really no more to tell.”

“Oh, but there must be,” cried the King. “How, for one thing, did you get the sham princess through the town and into the palace?”

“I made her keep her veil down,” answered the Knight, “and I had the sense to order some of the crowd to run on ahead and warn the King of our coming. He was waiting for us when we arrived; and, after a hasty embrace, he hustled the girl into an anteroom. Thence there emerged, two minutes later, the real Princess wearing the girl’s clothes and veil. She walked into the courtyard and threw open the veil. The crowd yelled like anything.”

“Oh! what a shame!” cried Cleodolinda.

“And then,” said the King, “the lady threw her arms round your neck and exclaimed, ‘My preserver! My future husband.’”

“How did you know that?” cried the startled St. George.

“Oh,” remarked the King, “one learns as one grows older.” And this time it was he and the Princess who smiled at each other.

“Well,” growled St. George, “I made it pretty clear to them, after we got inside again, that I was not seeking a wife yet. I saw to it, also, that the country wench who had impersonated the Princess for the dragon’s benefit was properly rewarded and returned safely to her home. And that really is the end of the story.”

“They offered you a knighthood, of course,” observed the King, “and, of course, you refused it.”

“Of course,” echoed both St. George and the Princess.

“Yes,” mused the King, “one could not accept a knighthood from so dishonorable a man. However, let us leave that unpleasant topic. You have contrived, St. George, to make your dragon-killing sound a very easy business. But I noticed, when you returned with my daughter the other day, that your helmet was deeply dented. How did that happen?”

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St. George blushed. “That was done, sire,” he admitted, “by the sting in the brute’s tail when it whipped over in the death

throes. You have to look out for that, of course, and jump the right way.”

“Which way did it come this time?” demanded the King.

St. George grew still more red. “Toward your daughter’s head, sir,” he muttered.

“And you, naturally, put your own head in the way,” observed the King.

“Why, of course,” said St. George angrily. “I had a helmet and she had none.”

“And then,” said the King, “you jumped back to the far side of the dragon so that the Princess, when she opened her eyes, should not guess what you had been doing.” He gave his thigh a resounding slap and let out a gale of laughter that shook the very roof. Cleodolinda did not laugh. She looked at St. George with shining eyes, and he forgot his embarrassment in the warmth of her gaze.

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“Oh, children, children!” gasped the King, and the other two thought he must have taken leave of his senses. He wiped his streaming eyes. “Do not mind me,” he said. “I am old, and I grow foolish. But now, Sir Knight, listen, and *I* will tell you something about dragons.”

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Chapter II

CURIOUS INCIDENT IN A DRAGON DRIVE

“The information I am going to give you,” began the King, “I had direct from my own astrologer royal, Sir Marmaduke Melchior, who is probably the most learned man in the whole country of Libya. Fire-breathing dragons, he told me, are rare for the simple reason that they come from volcanoes. Each of these burning mountains has within its glowing heart one fire-dragon. Now, when a volcano becomes burnt out, or ‘extinct,’ its dragon leaves it. The creature’s preliminary stirrings start, occasionally, a serious earthquake. Thereafter it emerges and seeks for a hotter place. Of course, it never finds one, and it dies in about a fortnight; but, during that period, it does, usually, an immense amount of damage. The dragon which wanted Cleodolinda came from a volcano in the country belonging to my sister, Queen Sophia—a country which borders mine on the east. This mountain ceased to erupt about two years ago; and, eighteen months later, there was a violent earthquake which tore great fissures in the countryside. A few days ago the dragon came out and made directly for my country. Sir Marmaduke, looking from the high tower of his observatory, saw the beast arrive.

“And now, here is another thing. Your discovery, St. George, that an armor of scales gives security against attack from the front, but none against assault from behind, is not really new. It is a piece of knowledge with which my hunters and the Princess here and I myself have long been acquainted. We employ it as a matter of course in all our dragon drives.” 17

“Dragon *what?*” inquired the puzzled St. George.

“Dragon *drives,*” repeated the King. “Do you not drive dragons in England?”

“We have no dragons there,” answered the Knight. “But would you kindly explain, sire, what is a ‘drive.’”

“There is a large wood near here,” said the King, “which is simply teeming with a small variety of dragon. The beasts are about as large as crocodiles; and, though they are not fire-breathers, they have armor of brazen scales, and very serviceable teeth and claws. They possess no poison stings; but, on the other hand, they are magnificent fliers, and can carry off oxen with ease. We compel them to fly from the forest over a line of archers standing upon the sward just beyond the edge of the trees. Our bowmen do not make the mistake of shooting at the creatures when these first appear flying toward them above the treetops. Arrows shot thus would simply glance harmlessly from the scales. No, the archer waits until the dragon has passed overhead, and then wheels round and shoots at the beast from behind. I tell you,” he went on with rising enthusiasm, “that there is no finer sight to be seen during a sportsman’s career than is afforded by one 18

of these smitten dragons towering up, up into the sky until it is scarcely more than a tiny dot, and then somersaulting over and over, growing rapidly larger as it falls down, down to strike the earth with a clang such as fifty forges could not imitate.”

“But how do you make the beasts fly?” asked St. George.

“With elephants,” replied the King. “We have a line of these animals stretching right across the forest. Each carries a mahout (specially imported from India) and a man whom we call the ‘beater’—because he beats upon a large gong as the line advances. The mahout blows upon a horn. The sight of this moving wave of elephants is most impressive, and the noise is quite terrific. Our dragons cannot stand elephants—claws and teeth make no impression upon those thick hides, and the mighty legs would crush any creature they trod upon. But here is an idea. Shall we have a dragon drive tomorrow, and then you, St. George, can see the sport for yourself? More, you can take your stand with the archers, for I hear that you English are skilled beyond all other men in the use of the bow.”

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“Splendid!” cried the Princess, clapping her hands, “and I, also, will take my bow and have a place among the shooters.”

“Now, now, Cleodolinda!” cried her father, “you know well that children, when they attend, must ride upon the elephants. The other post is too dangerous for them.”

“I would have you to know, my father,” replied the Princess, holding her head very high, “that I am no longer a child. I am

a married woman. Moreover, you will agree that the wife of the bravest knight in Christendom should be the last woman to regard her personal safety as a matter for great concern.”

“But can you shoot straight enough, my dear?” asked the anxious King.

The Princess extracted a lump of sugar from a little bowl on the table before her and presented the morsel to her father. Then she moved to the wall of the boudoir, upon which there hung a small silver-mounted bow and a quiver of arrows. “Do you, sire,” she said, “stand at the far end of the room, holding the sugar between your fingers. I will undertake to shoot that target away without injury to yourself.” She selected an arrow as she spoke.

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“No, no!” cried the King. “I will take your word for your skill, my pet.” He looked across at St. George, and both men, the old and the young, raised their eyebrows and grinned feebly. It was as if they had said, with one accord, “Oh, these women!”

“Very well, then,” sighed the King, “that is settled. Tomorrow at midday, let it be; for these dragons do not fly well until they have been warmed by the sun. And now I must leave you to your rest.” He rose and kissed the Princess’ fingers. “Your tea, my dear, is excellent beyond words; but I will take no more, for I suspect that it might unsteady me for the shooting. So, good night to you both.”

There was a pleasant bustle in the castle courtyard throughout the following morning, and St. George

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watched the proceedings with interest. The captain of the archers brought him a bow, and this proved to be so much less powerful than the English weapon that the Knight thought it advisable to put in an hour's practice at the archery butts. The arrival of the elephants drew him from that amusement. He had encountered elephants before—in the enemy's ranks during some of his campaigns—but he had never seen specimens so magnificent as were these which the King of Silene had collected. There were forty of them, all giants of their kind, and from their towering shoulders great scarlet saddlecloths drooped nearly to the ground. The cloths were fringed with hundreds of little bells; and bells, again, hung from bands encircling each elephant's legs; for the aim was to make the animals' progress as noisy as possible. The grinning Indians perched upon the mighty necks carried horns of a curious, twisted shape. These, when blown, produced a sound not unlike the trumpeting of an elephant; and, when this happened, the great beasts would elevate their trunks and trumpet in reply. The gong beaters sat in small howdahs; and each carried, besides his metal disc and hammer, a heavy, spiked mace with which to strike at any dragon which might have the temerity to turn and attack the driving line. But this last, St. George was told, happened very rarely. He was amused to see that the enormous animals devoured greedily the little cakes which the Princess Cleodolinda offered to each: indeed, this docility of creatures which he had known only as raging war monsters struck him as most surprising.

Cleodolinda was enthralled by St. George's description of the advance of an elephant line-of-battle, and marveled greatly that any army could defend itself against such an attack. St. George explained.

“You see,” he said, “the creatures are not brave individually. They need the support of their fellows in the line. When their riders are shot with arrows, the elephants, lacking guidance, can maintain that line no longer. It bends and divides, and then breaks up into single elephants rushing in every direction. These desire merely to escape from the battle; and the men of their own side, who try to drive them back to the attack, become the only sufferers.”

Here the conversation was interrupted by a clarion call from the castle, summoning all to a hasty meal. The sun was now high in the heavens, and there was no time to be wasted. Even the King, a notable trencherman, contented himself on this occasion with half a ham and two flagons of wine. St. George ate and drank even more sparingly; while Cleodolinda, who was wildly excited, could barely force herself to nibble the wing of a chicken. And so, with very little delay, they gathered again in the courtyard, and the procession set out for Dragon Wood.

Here the party divided. The elephant line filed away along the western border of the trees, while the others continued along the southern edge until they came to the eastern side. From this, rolling grassland descended gently to a valley, the bottom of which was out of sight. Beyond, the ground rose again, but the character of the country had changed. It had become a forbidding-looking territory of crags and rock-strewn plateau separated by gorges in which pine and thorn struggled for mastery. St. George, shading his eyes with his hand, saw that this desolate land swept away northward in a series of ridges until it ended in sunlit mist. In the immediate foreground there towered, faint and ethereal

against the pale-blue sky, a shining conical peak.

“Queen Sophia’s land,” said the King’s voice in his ear. “And yonder is the extinct volcano.”

“It ceased to erupt two years ago, I think you said, sire.”

“Yes,” answered the King, “but it caused most of that desolation first. The earthquake six months back did the rest.”

A horn sounded remotely—a single, interrogative note from the other side of the forest.

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“Ah!” cried the King. “That is to ask if we are ready. Come quickly. This way.”

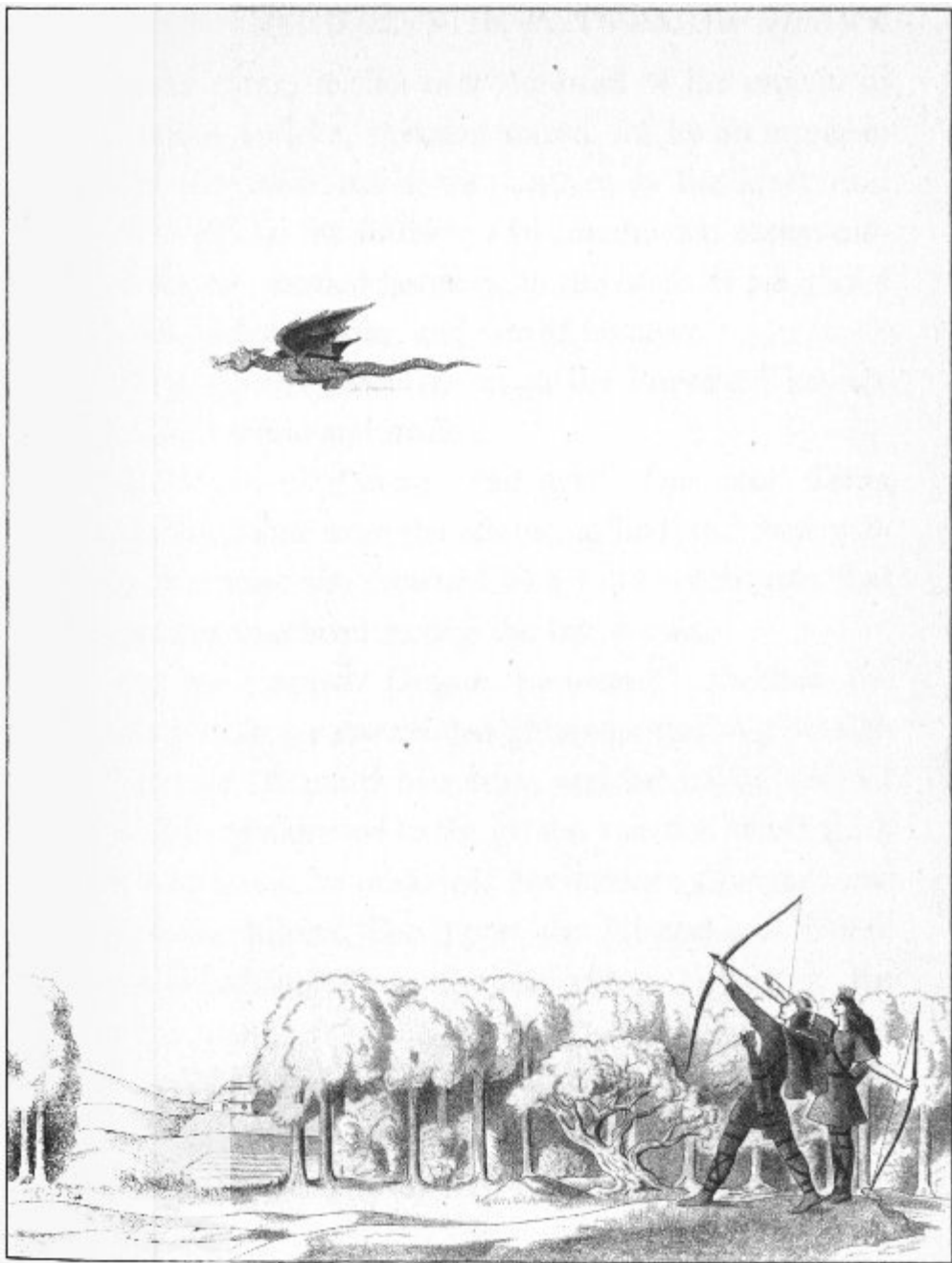
They strung out along the eastern border of the forest, standing fifty yards apart, and about forty paces back from the trees. Then the King blew a single blast upon his own horn.

The note had scarcely died away when, at the distant side of the forest, there broke out an indescribable tumult, faint at first, but growing rapidly louder. St. George, listening intently, could distinguish the trumpeting of the elephants and the clanging of the gongs, mingled with shrill cries of “Hi! yah! Hi! yah!” But the little bells were too far away to be heard.

“Look! look!” cried the Princess suddenly. She was standing nearest to him on his right.

St. George raised his head. Threading its way through the distant, green treetops, and traveling at an incredible speed,

there was coming toward them something which looked like a streak of golden light. As it reached the forest edge, it soared upward and revealed itself as an immense, lizardlike creature with long, gleaming body and broad, burnished wings. It shot over the head of the captain of the archers; and he, spinning round, let fly an arrow in pursuit. The shaft struck the creature in the lower ribs, burying itself to the feathers; and the dragon, somersaulting in the air, pitched headlong to the earth. It fell with a mingled crash and clang, and moved no more.



“Oh! good shot, Walter!” cried the Princess. The captain looked round and smiled.

Ding dong, ding dong. “Hi! yah!” Toot toot. Clang clang clang, came from the advancing line; and then, suddenly, the noise was drowned by a full-throated roar that echoed and re-echoed among the tree trunks.

“Dragon forward! Dragon for-r-ward!” shrieked the beaters. St. George saw another gleam approaching through the treetops. It sailed over him, and he turned and let drive. But, accustomed to the greater speed of the English cloth-yard arrow, he misjudged his distance allowance and shot too far behind. Thereupon, the Princess and Walter let fly simultaneously—and their arrows crossed in the dragon’s heart.

The next chance came to Cleodolinda, and she brought down her quarry very neatly. She was wild with delight, for this was a dragon she had killed entirely by herself—the first of which she could make that boast. Then a monster flew roaring over St. George, and this time he did not miss. The driving line was nearer now, and the tinkling of a thousand little bells made a background to the harsh clangor of the gongs, the shrill trumpeting of the elephants, the yells of the mahouts and the thunderous roars of startled dragons. Some of these last flew forward in silence, but most of them protested to the full power of their lungs. Soon, thirty golden bodies lay stretched on the grass behind the bowmen; and, of these victims, six had fallen to English archery. Cleodolinda had five to her credit, not counting the one she had shared with Walter. The King missed unfailingly, but this did not seem to affect his enjoyment in the least. He was at the end of the line, and a little crowd of peasants had collected there. They shouted respectful but contradictory advice . . . “Too far

forward, your Majesty” . . . “Too far behind!” He tried to take it all.

The elephant line was approaching the edge of the wood, and the din had become deafening. Then, suddenly, there came a change in the uproar. The trumpeting of the elephants increased; but the bells stopped ringing, the gongs ceased to beat, and, in place of yells of encouragement, shouts of warning were hurled to and fro along the evidently halted line. . . . “What’s that?” . . . “Look out, Abdullah!” . . . “There it goes!” . . . “Mind! Hamid, mind! It’s in front of you!” . . . “Danger! Danger!” The dragons had become completely silent. 27

Then came a long wail, “Oh, my elephant! my elephant! my Hannibal!” Then a mingled shriek of rage from the mahouts. “Ride her down! Ride her down!” The bells broke out again, and the crashing of the elephants’ feet could be heard anew; but these were drowned in an awful, ear-splitting howl.

“W-a-a-h hoo! W-a-a-h hoo! W-a-a-h hoo hoo hoo hoo h-o-o-o!”

“Danger forward! Danger! Mind! Mind!” screamed the beaters. Something was coming, *thud, thud, thud*, through the wood; and, as it approached, it howled like a lost soul.

The next moment, St. George saw a most extraordinary sight. Bounding through the air, in great, flying leaps of forty yards or more, there came an old woman—a hideous hag who showed long yellow tusks as she snarled over her shoulder at the angry mahouts behind. Her skinny arms were held high

over her head, and in each of her clenched fists she grasped a handful of leaves. She saw St. George, and swerved toward him, hissing like a snake.

St. George had faced many unexpected dangers, and was quick to perceive the important point in any new situation. He realized promptly that the *leaves* must be this hag's weapons; and, as she bounded, yelling anew, over his head, he sprang forward and threw himself flat on his face. The leaves pattered to the ground behind him. Then he rose on one knee, turned, and loosed an arrow after the disgusting creature. It struck her squarely between the shoulder blades—and rebounded, shattered to fragments. She laughed shrilly, and continued her course, speeding down the slope in leaps which no wild animal could have accomplished. As she fled, she broke out again into her dreadful howling, shrieking as if fiends were tearing her piecemeal. She was lost to view in the dip of the valley; but the howls continued, and, presently, they sighted her again, bounding up the opposite slope until, at last, she disappeared in one of the wooded gullies of Queen Sophia's land. Then her yelling ceased.

28

“A witch!” breathed Cleodolinda. She had run forward to St. George's side and was looking rather white.

“Of course,” said the King. He, also, had run forward, but appeared to be more angry than alarmed. “The point is,” he went on, “what is she doing here? We have not had a witch in my country for sixty years.”

29

“Ah!” cried an old peasant, who had appeared unobserved, “you may well ask that. It were from Queen Sophy's land she

come, and it were I as seed her coming. Five months ago it were. She come, and she settled in that there wood among all they dragons. And on nights when the moon's on the wane she comes to the edge of the trees there, and she howls like a mad dog. And whenever she does that, something bad happens to we poor farmers. 'Howling Harriet,' we calls her; and what I says is: She oughter be stopped by law."

"But why was I not told of this before?" cried the angry King.

"Eh, it don't do no good to tell tales of witches," said the old man, shaking his head.

"Well, you are telling them now," snapped the King.

"Why, bless my soul, so I be," cried the other, in evident dismay. He turned and hobbled off.

"Howling Harriet!" said the King. "A pretty creature. I wonder if Sophia knows she is there."

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" cried a voice. The King turned and saw a kneeling mahout. "My elephant," sobbed the man. Tears were streaming down his face, and he appeared incapable of further speech. But he pointed toward the wood.

30

"Come on," said the King shortly. He entered the trees, followed by the remainder of the party.

The elephant line had halted; but the great beasts, though uneasy, appeared to have suffered no injury. The King's attention, however, was caught immediately by a group of

mahouts and beaters clustered about something white behind the line, and he ran swiftly toward the spot.

There, towering among the trees, stood a magnificent elephant sculptured in purest white marble. It held one foot raised, as if to trample upon something venomous; its trunk was curled up and back as if trumpeting in wrath; and its whole expression bore token to a noble indignation, as if the beast were looking upon something unspeakably vile. The King gazed in admiration for a moment, and then horror spread slowly over his countenance.

“Heavens!” he gasped, “it is Hannibal! . . . My favorite elephant,” he added, for the benefit of St. George. He turned to the weeping mahout. “How did this happen?”

“The noble beast was about to trample upon the witch,” sobbed the man, “when she (may jackals howl on her grandmother’s grave) cast a handful of leaves upon him, and this—this calamity followed in the twinkling of an eye.”

31

The King laid his hand upon the man’s shoulder. “Hannibal shall stand in my courtyard,” he said. “He shall stand upon a pedestal of marble bearing in letters of pure gold the story of how he died doing his duty in battle with an evil thing.” He turned, frowning, to St. George. “But that woman, Howling Harriet, seems to be really dangerous. Queen Sophia should be warned at once.”

“Yes,” said the Knight, ruefully, “I suppose that a creature with an unpierceable hide, who can spring at you from forty yards distance and turn you immediately into a monument,

may be called without exaggeration ‘dangerous.’ In fact,” he added, “I do not see for the moment how there can be any defense against her at all.”

“She may have an unpierceable skin without possessing a set of unbreakable bones,” answered the King. “I should judge that she can be crushed. See how she fled from the elephants. I should like greatly to test her skull with a heavy mace.”

“A pleasant fancy,” agreed St. George, “but she is too agile for that, and her flung leaves would make stone of the mace wielder while he was trying to get within striking distance.”

32

Walter stepped forward. “Will you permit me, sire,” he begged, “to carry a warning to your Majesty’s sister?”

“No,” said the King, sharply, “I shall go myself. I must talk this matter over with the Queen. Her court magician must be utterly worthless to have allowed her land to become the refuge of a hag like that.”

“She is watching us now!” cried one of the archers. “I saw her move.”

“What of it?” said the King. “I am not proposing to cross the border here, but at the river bridge ten miles to the south.”

“But suppose—” Walter hesitated. “Suppose she guesses at your Majesty’s intention and lies in wait for you there. It would be useless to flee: she can travel faster than any deer.”

“Suppose! suppose! suppose!” cried the King angrily. “I tell

you that I am going. But you mean well, I know, Walter; and I shall travel with the greatest secrecy. More, you shall come with me.”

“And I also, I trust, sire?” asked St. George.

33

“Of course, my dear fellow,” replied the King. “I and, I am sure, my sister also will be delighted to have your assistance.”

The Princess Cleodolinda bit her lip, but she said nothing. She knew that there are times when it is useless for a mere woman to talk to a lot of men.

34

Chapter III

THE SILVER JAVELIN

The Princess Cleodolinda sat on a low stool, with her hands clasped round her knees, and talked with her old nurse. They were in the turret room of the topmost tower of the castle—a round room lighted by a lamp which hung from the middle of the ceiling and threw shadows like the spokes of a wheel upon the rush-strewn floor. Outside, the wind whistled in a rising gale; and, through the narrow slit of one of the windows, Cleodolinda could see dark clouds scurrying ever faster across the face of a pallid moon. Neither of these things helped to allay her anxiety.

“They will be more than halfway to the bridge by now,” she said. “I wish there were some means of getting news.”

“Now, don’t you worry, my pet,” said the old woman. She was sitting in a high-backed chair, and her hands were busy with needlework. “They won’t come to any harm. Your father is a man that has his head put on properly straight, and your knight is quicker to think and quicker to act than any man in Europe, so they say. It would be a clever witch that would get the better of those two.”

35

“But witches *are* clever,” cried the Princess, wringing her

hands.

“Not they,” declared the nurse contemptuously. “Most of them know one spell and one spell only; and, if you try them out in some way where that spell won’t help them, you find them far more foolish than the ordinary run of folk. I remember,” she went on, putting down her work, “the time when Giggling Gertrude lived in the marsh over there. That was before your father was born. Now, she was a fearsome creature, if you like. Travelers passing that swamp at night used to hurry by with their hands clapped over their ears, in terror lest they should hear Gertrude giggling among the rushes.”

“Why? What did she do?” asked the Princess, with bated breath.

“Just giggled,” replied the nurse. “But those that heard her *had to go to her.*”

“How awful!” cried Cleodolinda.

“Yes,” said the nurse, “‘awful’ is the word. She used to come out at times and help herself to what food she needed from the farmers’ fields and gardens. One man tried to stop her—but after that folks let her alone.”

36

“What happened to the man?” asked the Princess.

“When she came out,” replied the nurse, “she used to walk with a bent head, and with a hood over her face. This man was a cross-grained creature, always grumbling about trespassers. He ordered her off his land. She just raised her

head and dropped her hood. Those who saw it happen were too far away to hear her, but they could see her shoulders shaking with laughter. And he, poor fool, he just lowered his arms to his sides and walked slowly toward her. She had talons inches long, and . . .”

“Oh, don’t,” cried the Princess, clapping her hands over her ears.

“Very well, then, I won’t,” said the nurse. “But Sir Marmaduke Melchior, he finished her off proper.”

“How?” asked Cleodolinda.

“She lived on a little island in the swamp,” explained the nurse, “and all around her was stagnant water. But, one dark night, he turned a brook in at the top of the marsh and cut a channel at the lower end, leading out into the river. He had a hundred workmen digging the soft ground, all silent, and all with cotton wool in their ears. And, so, next morning, she found running water all round her island.”

“But how did that finish her?” asked the Princess.

37

“Witches can’t cross running water,” cried the nurse, triumphantly. “So she just had to stay there and starve. They say she stopped giggling toward the end.”

Cleodolinda shuddered. Then a thought struck her. “But, if witches cannot cross running water, how did that Harriet hag get over the brook at the bottom of the valley?”

“Why, didn’t you know that there is no brook there?” cried

the nurse. “It dried up after the earthquake.

“Then, I remember, there was another one,” she went on. “Dear me, how it all comes back. ‘Hissing Hester,’ they called her. She was a woman by day, but at night she was a great serpent, thick as a barrel, and ever so long—a serpent that could smash in the shutters of a farmhouse with a blow of its great head, and— Oh! very well, I won’t, my dear, if you don’t like it. But it found a farmer’s wife waiting for it in the room one night, and she had got herself a silver hatchet, made specially for her purpose.”

“A silver hatchet?” said the puzzled Princess.

“Bless my soul! how ignorant people are nowadays,” grumbled the nurse. “Surely, everybody knows that steel weapons can’t hurt witches. But silver—silver goes through them like a knife through butter.”

38

“But people *don’t* know,” cried Cleodolinda, springing up. “Why did you not warn us? We have *forgotten* all about witches.” She wrung her hands again, and a sob escaped her. “My father took a steel mace; my husband carried a steel sword; while Walter had his ordinary arrows. And that awful hag is lying in wait for them. Watchers saw her near the bridge this evening!”

“Eh! That’s bad hearing,” said the startled nurse, shocked out of her complacency. “Someone had better run after them and take a quiverful of silver arrows.”

“Run after them!” echoed Cleodolinda. “Who could overtake them in time?” She paced wildly about the room. “Silver

arrows! How long do you suppose it would take us to forge them? There is not a silver weapon of any kind in the whole armory!”

But, as she said this, she stood suddenly stock-still.

She had remembered that on the wall of her own boudoir there hung a little silver javelin. It was a mere toy—an ornament not intended for use—the first prize in a children’s javelin-throwing competition which she had won five years ago. But it was three feet long, and heavy, and—silver went through witches “like a knife through butter.” She seized her nurse by the shoulders.

39

“My silver javelin! Will it serve?” she cried.

“Eh?” said the nurse. “Oh, the thing on your wall. It’s overshort for use as a spear; yet, if it can be thrown straight, you might have a worse weapon. But silver arrows, now. They . . .” She found herself addressing the empty air. The Princess had gone.

Cleodolinda sped swiftly down the winding turret stair; and, as she ran, her thoughts raced faster than her flying feet. A horse would be useless, for the way to the bridge was no beaten path, but a mere boulder-strewn track; and, on such a night as this, a horse would need to be walked. Who, then, was the swiftest runner in the castle? Robin the Courier—but he was away with those who were watching the frontier. Walter came next—but Walter was with the King and St. George. A glow of delight mingled with her desperate anxiety as she realized that there was none other left in the castle who

could run so fast or so far as could she herself. She might go with a clear conscience, it was her duty now to disobey her father's and her husband's commands.

As she snatched down the javelin she asked herself whether she should wait to change into her running dress. Her impulse was to go as she was, in her long evening robes, but she recognized that for a mere counsel of panic. It would save time to change. It would save time even to wait to put on stronger sandals. She forced her feverish fingers to work at a steady speed—it would not do to fumble or to jam knots.

40

At last she was ready. She had judged the proper steady pace for her long run, and she started that run, at that pace, from her bedroom door. "Open the gates! Open quickly!" she called as she flew down the main stairs. Startled pages in the great hall, recognizing her voice, sprang to obey her command; and, throwing open the doors, shouted across the courtyard to the sentinels at the main gate, "The Princess Cleodolinda bids you open quickly." She found her way clear, and, passing swiftly through the crowd of astonished servitors, raced on down the hillside. The fitful moonlight gave them glimpses of her white tunic as she leapt from rock to rock, and then she vanished in the gloom. They looked at each other and shook their heads. What would the King say? But, there—in his absence, she was in command.

41

* * * * *

A mile from the bridge, the King, at that moment, was

engaged in rating another rebel; namely, Walter, captain of archers, who had disobeyed, for the second time that evening, his Majesty's express commands. The three adventurers had halted at the crest of a long slope which fell gently away to where a misty gleam betrayed the distant river. The King and St. George had intended to cross that crest with caution, for it would form a skyline to any watcher at the bridge; but Walter, a little ahead of them, had spoiled their plan by striding forward at such a pace that St. George had been obliged to run before he could overtake him and bring him to a halt.

"I told you," stormed the King, "that I should lead, and that you were to follow. And you, an officer of soldiers, not only flout my orders, but dash forward with all the unthinking impatience of a raw recruit. It is enough. You can go home."

"Your Majesty," pleaded the miserable Walter, "forgive me. I admit my fault; but tonight I am not myself." He mopped his brow. "There is a damsel in danger at yonder bridge, and I am in an agony of terror lest the witch Harriet should discover her before we can give her warning."

42

"A damsel!" said the King, frowning. "What damsel?"

"She is a subject of your Majesty's sister," answered Walter, "and it is our custom to meet at that bridge for conversation on this night of every week."

The King stared at him. "Conversation!" he exclaimed. "About what do you converse? Are you betrothed?"

"Oh, no!" cried Walter. "Miranda is too young and innocent for me to speak to her as yet of love. We talk of flowers."

“A captain of my archers prates to a girl of flowers,” fumed the King. “Why, man, what ails you? And what do you know of flowers?”

“Nothing,” confessed Walter. “But she is the daughter of one Thomas, who is a marvelous grower of rare blooms; and she talks to me of her father’s work. Other words are burning ever on my lips, for I love her very dearly; but of this she has no suspicion, so, lest she guess and take fright, I keep the conversation to flowers. We have discussed delphiniums now for three weeks past, and I fear that I am beginning to regard those plants with an odd and unmerited loathing.”

“Bah!” said the King. “I will warrant that the minx knows well enough the state of your feelings. You will lose her, man, if you keep her waiting too long. Take my advice. When next she speaks of delphiniums, do you smack her soundly on the shoulder and cry, ‘Enough of this nonsense, wench, wilt marry me?’”

43

“Oh, I could not!” cried the horrified Walter. “Indeed, I could not. Why, I might lose her forever.”

“Bah!” said the King again. “But, if you are too timid to speak, she, I dare prophesy, will find means to loosen your tongue. However, we waste time. There is another cloud approaching the moon. When it covers her, and darkness falls, we must run forward. When it passes, and the night grows bright again, we must lie down in the undergrowth and wait in patience for the next opportunity. It will do your Miranda no service if the witch sees our approach and comes to the bridge to meet us.”

Progress, under these conditions, was maddeningly slow. The moon, perversely, seemed to be determined to show how great were her powers of cloud penetration when once she had made up her mind to shine. The blackest-looking masses, on crossing her face, dissolved into drifts of faint smoke; and so seldom did she submit to defeat that over an hour and a quarter elapsed before the three adventurers set foot upon the bridge. Just as they did so, the gale blew the sky clear of all clouds, and they stood exposed in a flood of moonlight which illumined all the country before them.

On the far side of the bridge the track which they had been traversing broadened out preparatory to its junction with a wide road running parallel to the river. This road, if followed to the left, led to a dark wood, beyond which lay Queen Sophia's palace. The country immediately in front of the bridge was devoid of trees and covered with a low scrub.

The King was leading, and, as he halted, irresolute in the sudden light, he saw something small emerge from the dark tunnel where the road dipped into the wood and come running toward the bridge. A moment later it became distinguishable as a child staggering from side to side in, apparently, the last stages of exhaustion. It was sobbing painfully; and, as it glanced backward over its shoulder, its voice rose in a sudden scream of terror.

"Help! Help!" it shrieked. "The witches are after me!"

"This way!" roared the King. He took a step forward. Then he halted; for, at the sound of his voice, the child wheeled round as if to flee back to the wood. It paused,

however, and shading its eyes with one hand stared at the three figures on the bridge.

“Are you witches?” it cried. They could see now that it was a little boy.

“No,” shouted the King, “we are friends. Do not be afraid of us.”

The boy, apparently reassured, ran swiftly toward him, his fatigue disappearing with the renewal of hope. “It is the witches who are after me,” he sobbed. “Hold my hand. Oh! *please* hold my hand. They can’t hurt me then.”

The King sprang across the bridge, hand outstretched. The boy thrust his own hand forward as he ran. But, before the two could meet, an interruption occurred.

A little white animal sprang from the bushes bordering the path, and darted between the child’s legs. The youngster tripped and fell flat on his face at the King’s feet. Rising to his knees, with his right shoulder toward the King, he turned his head to the left and stared at the creature which had upset him and which was now sitting upright in the road. It was a white rabbit.

“*You!*” said the boy slowly. “I thought I had finished with *you*. Come here at once.”

The rabbit made a hop in his direction, and then swerved and began to circle toward the King behind the boy’s back. The boy, without changing the position of his body, turned his head round farther to the left—turned it until it seemed that

his neck must snap—continued to turn it until, to the King’s amazement, it was facing completely backward. The rabbit stopped moving and shivered.

“Come here and be punished!” hissed the boy; and never would the King have believed that so much evil could look out from a child’s face. The rabbit cringed, and began to crawl toward the little monster.

At that moment the child—or whatever the thing was—saw, with its left eye, the King staring down at it. Instantly, the wickedness vanished from its countenance, and was replaced by a look of frightened innocence. “The witches are after me! Hold my hand,” sobbed the little horror; and the King gave a yelp of dismay as the head continued to turn until it had made a complete circle and was facing again toward the front. A clutching hand was thrust out to be taken.

The King jumped back. St. George jumped forward. The boy, kneeling, offered a mark like a Rugby football, and the Knight’s foot caught him in the proper place. He sailed through the air and landed on all fours twenty yards away. He was up in an instant, and fled over the moor at an incredible speed, screeching, “The witches are after me! Help! Help!”

47

“What, what?” gasped the King, as he mopped his brow.

“A warlock, sire, evidently,” said St. George, watching the fugitive figure. “I wonder what would have happened had you taken his hand. It seems to me that this rabbit must have saved your Majesty’s life.”

“I believe you are right,” said the King ruefully. “But, tell me,

how on earth does one set about saying ‘Thank you’ to a rabbit?”

But the rabbit did not seem to be worrying about the royal gratitude. It had run forward to Walter, and was standing now on its hind legs, with its forepaws on the archer’s knee.

“It seems tame enough,” observed the King.

“It is a pretty little thing,” said Walter. He picked it up as he spoke, and it nestled confidingly in his arms.

The King approached, and touched it gingerly upon the head. “Thank you, rabbit,” he said. The rabbit looked at him, but naturally made no answer.

48

“Oh! come on,” cried the King impatiently, “we cannot stay here all night. Something evil seems to have befallen this land of my sister’s, and the sooner we are safe in her palace the better pleased I shall be.”

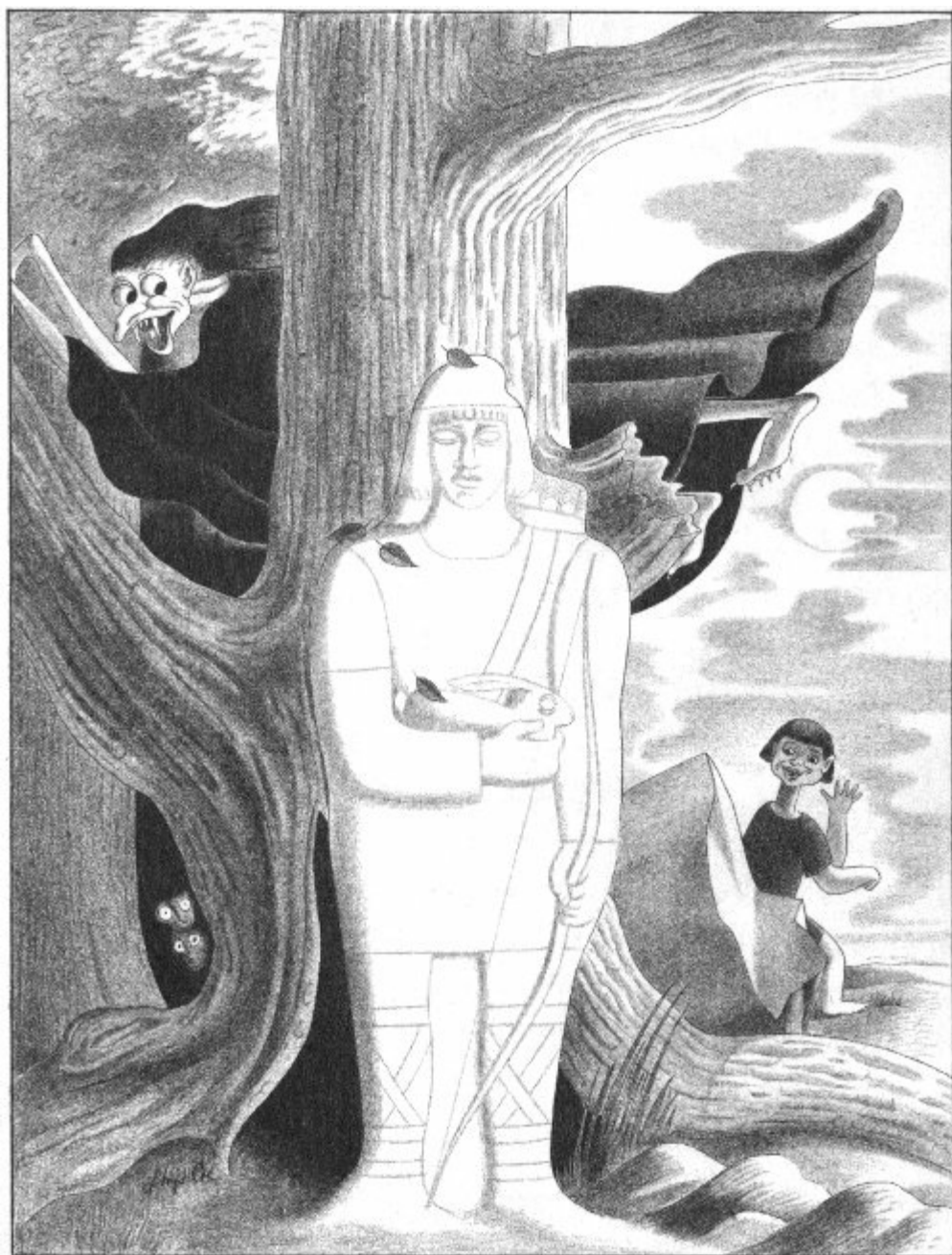
All three strode forward, Walter carrying the rabbit; but, as they approached the wood, St. George seized the King by the arm and brought him to a halt.

“Sire,” he whispered, “I like not the look of yonder avenue. Is there no way by which we can pass round this wood?”

“It stretches three leagues to the eastward,” replied the King, “and the ground at its edge is mostly bog. It would be better, I should say, to face whatever danger may lie before us.”

“Then,” said St. George, “your Majesty, perhaps, will permit

me to advise. If we encounter the witch Harriet among those trees, let us divide and surround her, sheltering behind the trunks from the leaves she throws. When she has cast both handfuls without effect, he who is behind her should spring upon her before she can seize a new supply. Our weapons cannot harm her; but, though she is, doubtless, stronger than any human woman, the three of us might be able to strangle her or break her neck.”



“Good counsel, indeed,” said the King. “Do you hear, Walter?”

But during this conversation Walter had got ahead once more. He stood now at the mouth of the leafy tunnel just beneath the first arching branches, and the rabbit tucked under one arm showed white against the blackness beyond. Walter, in shadow, could be distinguished only by the glint of his armor, but—but—St. George rubbed his eyes—what trick of the light was this?—*Walter was now white as the rabbit!* And, as he realized that this was no illusion, the Knight saw that leaves were fluttering from Walter's shoulders to the ground.

The next moment there was a crashing in the branches above the archer's head, and then, with a heavy thud, Howling Harriet dropped to the ground beside him. The witch patted his rigid body and laughed shrilly. Then, springing up, she snatched from the branches two more handfuls of leaves, and, as she flopped back into the road, turned her evil face toward the King and St. George.

The King hurled his heavy mace—and missed by yards. St. George drew his useless sword; and, as he did so, the sound of someone running on the bridge came to his ears.

50

“Guard my back, sire!” he shouted, for he knew not what strange attack might be approaching from the rear. Then he advanced toward the hag. Harriet crouched, the knuckles of her clenched fists resting on the ground.

The Knight shouted and waved his sword, in the vain hope of confusing the dreadful creature. She stared at him without moving. Even when he threw the weapon into her face, she did not blink. The sword rebounded from her forehead, and she let out a short cackle of laughter. Then, suddenly, her eyes

shifted, and the Knight saw that she was looking beyond him. He heard a patter of light feet approaching on the road behind; but he dared not look round. A look of gloating delight had appeared upon the witch's face. Noting that her attention was momentarily distracted, the Knight seized the frail opportunity and sprang forward.

It was useless. Her eyes flashed back to him in an instant, and she rose to her full height, both arms extended above her head, her lips curled back from her tusks in an evil snarl. St. George gave himself up for lost.

Then something which looked like a streak of silvery light flew past him from behind. It sped on toward the witch, struck her in the right shoulder, passed clean through her, and clattered on the road beyond.

51

The hag screamed—horribly. The leaves fell from her paralyzed right hand. She dropped those in her left hand and clutched with this at her injured shoulder. Blood spurted from between the fingers, and at the sight she screamed again. Then she leapt sideways from the road, turned, and fled eastward along the woods edge, bounding from tussock to tussock of the marshy soil at a speed which put pursuit out of the question.

On the ground at St. George's feet, drawing her breath in sobbing gasps, lay the Princess Cleodolinda.

52

Chapter IV

REMARKABLE BEHAVIOR OF QUEEN SOPHIA

St. George wasted no time in asking questions of a completely winded girl. Kneeling beside the Princess as she lay on her face, he began to administer a curious form of first aid, unknown to most Europeans even to this day. It consists of a very rapid patting with both hands alternately—a series of drumming little slaps—the hands traveling meanwhile down the spine from the neck to the waist and back again. The effect was magical. To the Princess it seemed that torrents of sweet, cold air were pouring into her starved lungs; and, though she still breathed fast, each breath drawn was a relief and no longer a mockery. In less than half a minute she was able to sit up and talk.

And then, of course, there were pettings and explanations and more pettings. Preoccupation with the latter prevented St. George from taking in the full import of Cleodolinda's disjointed story; but he succeeded in gathering that an old nurse called Hissing Hester had declared that silver would go through witches like a knife through butter and that her statement was true. "But I ought to have killed her," wailed the Princess. "I missed. I missed. I hit her only in the

shoulder.”

“It was a shot good enough to save your husband, my queen of wives,” said St. George, “and it is a marvel that you hit the animal at all, considering your state of exhaustion.” He was examining her feet as he talked. Her shoes were torn to flapping fragments; and without more ado he swung her up to his left shoulder, advanced to where the javelin lay on the road, picked up the weapon, and turned a questioning gaze upon the King.

“Yes, forward!” said that monarch. He was feeling all bothered. He had missed Howling Harriet with his mace, and his daughter did not seem to belong to him any more. Moreover, Sophia had no business to let her country get into a state like this. “Forward!” he repeated.

They passed the statue of *Archer with Pet Rabbit*—a fine piece of work, no doubt, but profoundly irritating to a king who felt strongly that such methods of construction were entirely out of date. However, there was nothing that anyone could do about it, so the trio plunged on into the depths of the wood. No further adventures befell them there. The avenue proved to be short, and five minutes’ walking brought them out again into moonlight and the open moor.

54

The King strode ahead, his chin sunk on his breast, his eyes on the ground, his recovered mace dangling by a thong from his wrist. He gave little heed to his way—he was thinking of the things he was going to say to Queen Sophia. Fortunately, there was only one road to follow. It kept parallel to the river, but climbed steadily higher and higher above the water, so

that presently the murmur of the stream was rising from the bottom of a deep ravine. The clouds had rallied after their temporary defeat and were besieging the moon with such effect that no light penetrated the tangle of trees and bush which crowded the sides of the gully and pushed out over the water below. But there was life down there, someone talking, apparently, to himself; and once St. George heard a loud shout of “Ha! there’s a fine salmon.” A fisherman, concluded the Knight; and then, recalling the words of that cry, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. “Salmon in Africa!” he said. “How very odd!”

“Why, what is a ‘salmon’?” asked the Princess. St. George tried to explain.

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“It sounds very pretty,” said Cleodolinda. “I should like to see one jumping like that. But there is no such fish in this country.”

“That is what I thought,” replied St. George, and would have said more were it not that Cleodolinda, from her perch upon his shoulder, glimpsed, at that moment, lights shining through a fringe of firs which topped the rising ground before them.

“Look, my father!” she called. “The palace!”

The King turned at her voice and, then, looked ahead. “Dear me!” he said, “how fast we must have walked. I thought we had another five miles to go.” He swung his mace joyfully and hurried forward at an increased speed.

They climbed the rise, passed through the firs and emerged upon an open plateau. This was bounded on the

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left by the now precipitous river gorge; and on the nearer edge of that chasm there stood, half a mile away, the towering, jagged pile which was Queen Sophia's palace. Against the moon-rent clouds it loomed black as a raven's wing, save where a few slits of faint light showed among the upper turrets. But, as the travelers watched, these slits began to increase in number, breaking out all over the dark façade, until presently a sudden brilliant square at the ground level showed where the door of the lighted hall had been flung open.

"They must have seen us," said the King.

St. George glanced back over his shoulder. "Not against the trees, sire," he replied.

"And they could not have recognized you at this distance," added Cleodolinda.

Nevertheless, as they advanced, a fanfare of trumpets came to their ears, and they could see little figures running out from the lighted doorway.

"Seen us they have," affirmed the King. "Those men are hurrying to lower the drawbridge. I must explain, St. George, that this castle is bordered on three sides by a little stream, a tributary of the main river on our left. This tributary divides on the east side of the building, one branch passing in front and the other behind, and these fall over the precipice in two cascades to join the river below. The castle is, thus, completely surrounded by water."

"Running water, too," said Cleodolinda, "so they ought to be

safe from witches.”

The gleam from the open hallway lit up the planks of the lowered drawbridge and showed, in silhouette, the figure of a short, rotund man standing in the gateway beyond.

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“That looks like old Sir Rudolph, the seneschal,” said the King. He stepped on the bridge as he spoke, and then halted with an exclamation of surprise. “Why, Sir Rudolph!” he cried. “What has happened to the water?”

St. George and the Princess, peering over the side of the bridge, saw beneath them a perfectly dry river bed.

The man removed his cap and bowed profoundly, but he made no reply.

“Well?” said the King, advancing. “I await your explanation.”

“Bub-bub-bub-bub-bub.”

“*What?*” said the King.

“Tut-tut-tut-tut-tut.”

“What ails the man?” said the annoyed monarch. “Sir Rudolph was not wont to have an impediment in his speech.”

“Ss-ss-ss-ss-ss,” hissed the unfortunate man; but then a large hand caught him by the shoulder and yanked him back. A tall man stood bowing in his place.

“Your Majesty,” he said sadly, “poor Sir Rudolph had

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the misfortune, a little while ago, to encounter a witch, and this, alas! is the unhappy consequence of that meeting.”

“Ah!” said the King, “I begin to understand. But there is much that I have yet to learn. My sister, doubtless, will enlighten me. Lead on, good fellow—I do not know your name.”

“Leopold, your Majesty,” replied the man. He bowed again, turned, and led the way across the courtyard. He walked, they noticed, with an odd gait—long strides with a kind of trip and recovery in each; and then St. George saw that he was afflicted with a most peculiar deformity. His right and left legs were of equal lengths, but the knee of the former was twelve inches lower than that of the other.

“He, also, appears to have met with a witch,” murmured the Knight; and Cleodolinda, watching the man with pitying eyes, nodded her head.

As they entered the great hall, there was a rustle of silks on the stairway, and Queen Sophia swept down.

“Rupert! My dear Rupert!” she cried to the King, and threw her arms around his neck. “I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you. Have you come to help me in my trouble?”

“That, precisely, is the reason why I am here,” replied the King, patting her shoulder. “But look round. See who it is that I have brought with me.”

“Why, Cleodolinda!” cried Sophia. “But, darling, how can I kiss you up there? Come down, and tell me the name of this

tall knight who carries you like a feather.”

The King answered her. “This,” he said with pride, “is St. George of England. He and Cleodolinda are married.”

“Ah!” said the Queen. She ran her eyes up and down St. George critically, in a way which made him feel uncomfortable. “Yes,” she remarked thoughtfully, “a mastiff. Not a bulldog—oh, certainly not!—but a mastiff.”

“Eh,” said the King.

“Why,” cried the Queen, “did you not know that every human being resembles some bird or beast or fish? You, my dear Rupert, at this moment, are exactly like a gaping carp. Cleodolinda, perched up there, is the image of an irritated dove. But, my goodness! child, whatever have you been doing to your dress?”

“Cleodolinda has been running through briars,” said the King shortly. “I will tell you why presently: it is a long story. But, meanwhile, can you lend her something fit to wear?”

“Why, of course!” cried the Queen. “She shall have the best in my wardrobe. I think—” here she paused with her head on one side studying her niece—“yes, you shall have a dress of real dove’s feathers, darling. It will suit you to perfection. But, first, you must have some refreshment, and you too, St. George. Rupert, I have a wine for you which will gladden your heart. From the vineyards of Cyprus, fifteen years in the cask.”

“Ah!” said the King. “Lead the way, my dear. Our story, and

yours, can wait.”

St. George swung the Princess lightly to the ground, and all three followed Queen Sophia up the broad marble staircase. Facing this, at the top, were the open double doors of a large, brilliantly lighted room. Here they found awaiting them a banquet of great magnificence.

“Sit down, all of you,” said the Queen gaily. “No ceremony.” She took her own place at the head of the table as she spoke. In front of her was a large dish, flanked on one side by a heavy, broad-bladed silver knife and on the other by a silver fork of corresponding size. The Queen raised the dish cover with one hand, while with the other she waved to her guests to be seated. The King and Cleodolinda took their chairs, but St. George forgot his manners. He stood staring at the contents of the dish and then turned a surprised look upon his hostess.

“So there are salmon in these rivers,” he observed, with a puzzled frown.

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The Queen looked annoyed.

“And why not, Sir Knight?” she asked tartly.

“Well, I do not really know why not,” confessed St. George, “but it seems odd.”

“Odd to the ignorant, no doubt,” said the Queen. “But sit down, Sir Knight. What is that weapon you are carrying? Stand it in the corner.”

“That,” said the King, “is a silver javelin.”

The Queen shuddered. “What a horribly dangerous thing,” she cried. “Put it out of sight.”

“It is excellent for witches,” remarked the King, as St. George carried the weapon to the far end of the room. “Tonight it has wounded one nearly to death.”

Queen Sophia replaced the dish cover. “Which one was that?” she asked, frowning.

“Howling Harriet was her ridiculous name,” replied the King.

“I have heard of her,” said the Queen shortly. “A clumsy creature, and crude in her methods.” She stared at St. George. “How did you manage it?” she asked.

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“It was not I, but the Princess Cleodolinda who performed that feat,” replied St. George proudly.

“Ah!” said Queen Sophia. She clapped her hands; and, in immediate response, the man Leopold limped in from a door hidden behind the arras. “Bring Thomas,” commanded the Queen; and the man bowed and withdrew.

“So,” said the Queen, staring at the Princess, “you wounded Howling Harriet?”

“Yes,” replied Cleodolinda, addressing her aunt for the first time, “I wounded her, and I wish I had killed her.”

“So do I,” cried the Queen passionately. “The clumsy creature.”

The limping servitor reappeared. In his hands he bore a large bird cage, in which, glaring through the bars, sat a magnificent black cat.

“My new cat,” said the Queen to her surprised guests. She was all smiles again. “I thought you would like to see him. Is he not a beauty? I call him ‘Thomas.’ A good name for a cat, do you not agree?”

“Sophia,” said the King anxiously, “are you feeling perfectly well? You must not let us tire you.”

“Quite well, I thank you, my dear carp—I mean, my dear King,” replied the Queen. “Leopold, put down that cage and bring a pail of water. And bring also a dog collar and a chain.” She turned to Cleodolinda. “Thomas is hungry,” she remarked. “He is going to have a white rabbit to eat presently, and I want him to have a good appetite. But first, as a special treat, he shall be allowed to catch a dove. I do not like doves.” Here the cat snarled at her and spat furiously. “Oh! naughty Thomas,” cried the Queen, and went into a prolonged fit of laughter, rocking in her chair with a merriment which seemed to the anxious King almost hysterical.

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Cleodolinda was on her knees by the cage. “Poor Thomas,” she cried, “I am sure he is unhappy shut up like that. May I let him out, dear aunt?”

“Why, yes,” said the Queen. “You shall let him out yourself. That will be most amusing.”

The King looked at St. George and shook his head sadly. St. George, who by now was quite certain that the Queen had

taken leave of her senses, replied with a glance of sympathy. Sophia leaned forward with her elbows on the table, watching Cleodolinda with eyes that gleamed like diamonds.

The Princess slipped back the catch of the cage door, and Thomas stalked out. He leapt lightly on to the table, walked across this, crouched, and then sprang to where, high upon a wall bracket, stood a little yellow flower growing in a small pot. The cat struck the wall a yard beneath his mark and slithered to the ground. The Queen burst into another fit of laughter.

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“Oh, Thomas!” she cried, mopping her eyes, “how funny you are. He wants to eat that flower,” she explained to her guests, “and he knows he is not allowed to do so. That is why it is put out of his reach.”

“What flower is it, madam?” asked St. George.

The Queen stared at him for nearly half a minute before replying. “It is called ‘Moly,’” she said at last, and continued to stare at the Knight.

“I have never heard of it before,” said St. George.

“It seems to me, Sir Knight, that there are many things of which you have not heard,” replied the Queen. Here Leopold entered again, bearing a pail of water and a big leather collar. The latter was attached to a length of steel chain. “Put them on the floor,” said the Queen, and the man obeyed.

“And now, my dear Rupert, let us drink,” cried Sophia. She poured out four crystal goblets of a glowing ruby

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wine and handed one of these to each of her guests. The King sniffed at his.

“Ah,” said he appreciatively, “this, Sophia, reminds me of old times.”

“Me also,” said the Queen slowly and thoughtfully. “Let us drink to old times.” She placed her elbows on the table, and rested her chin upon her hands. “Old times,” she sighed. “Ah me!” Her face took on a dreamy look: she seemed to have forgotten her guests. “Wine of Cyprus,” she murmured. “When did I last drink of this? Ah! I mind me well. It was the day when the sail of the Wanderer first notched the purple horizon, and the song of his rowers drifted over the gleaming sea. Very faint it came. The little, sighing ripple at the sand’s edge fell far more loudly on the ears.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” cried the King violently.

Queen Sophia gave a start. “I beg your pardon, my brother,” she said in evident confusion. “It was a dream which I have had repeatedly, and for the moment I thought of it as real. But drink! Drink long and deep, all of you. Drink to old times.” She raised her goblet as she spoke.

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“Ow!” yelled the King. His goblet fell from his hand to the floor, and he kicked out beneath the table. “That accursed cat has dug his claws half an inch into my knee.”

The Queen went white, and her eyes blazed.

“Thomas!” she cried in an awful voice. “For that you shall go

into the palace well. Catch him, Leopold!”

The limping man sprang to obey her commands, but Thomas was too quick for him. The cat rushed to the far end of the room and darted up a curtain which hung there beside an open window. From the top it glared at Leopold, spitting furiously.

“Let it be,” said the Queen. The rage died from her face. “And go!” she added. The limping Leopold slipped away, and the Queen busied herself with the filling of another goblet. The King watched her with bent brows. His mind was racing furiously. There was something he was trying to recall. For some obscure reason he felt it to be vitally important that he should effect that act of remembrance within the next half minute. Who was it had been named the “Wanderer”?

“Now,” cried the Queen gaily, “let us start afresh! Are you two ready? Then, here is yours, my dear Rupert. We shall all drain our goblets together when I give the toast.”

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The King extended his hand. (*Who was it who had been called the “Wanderer”?*) Queen Sophia wore well, he thought; her arm was still white and rounded, her wrist still plump, her fingers—

He stared incredulously, blinked, and stared again. The hand which held the goblet had five fingers and no thumb.

For one awful moment he seemed to himself to be paralyzed. Then the power of action came back to him. He swung round toward the Princess and St. George.

“Don’t touch it!” he roared. “Throw it down! *This is not*

Queen Sophia! She is—she is—”

In a flash the lost memory returned to him. “Ulysses!” he shouted. “*He* was the ‘Wanderer.’ And you, you,” he turned fiercely upon the sham queen, “you must be—Saints in heaven, you must be *Circe!*”

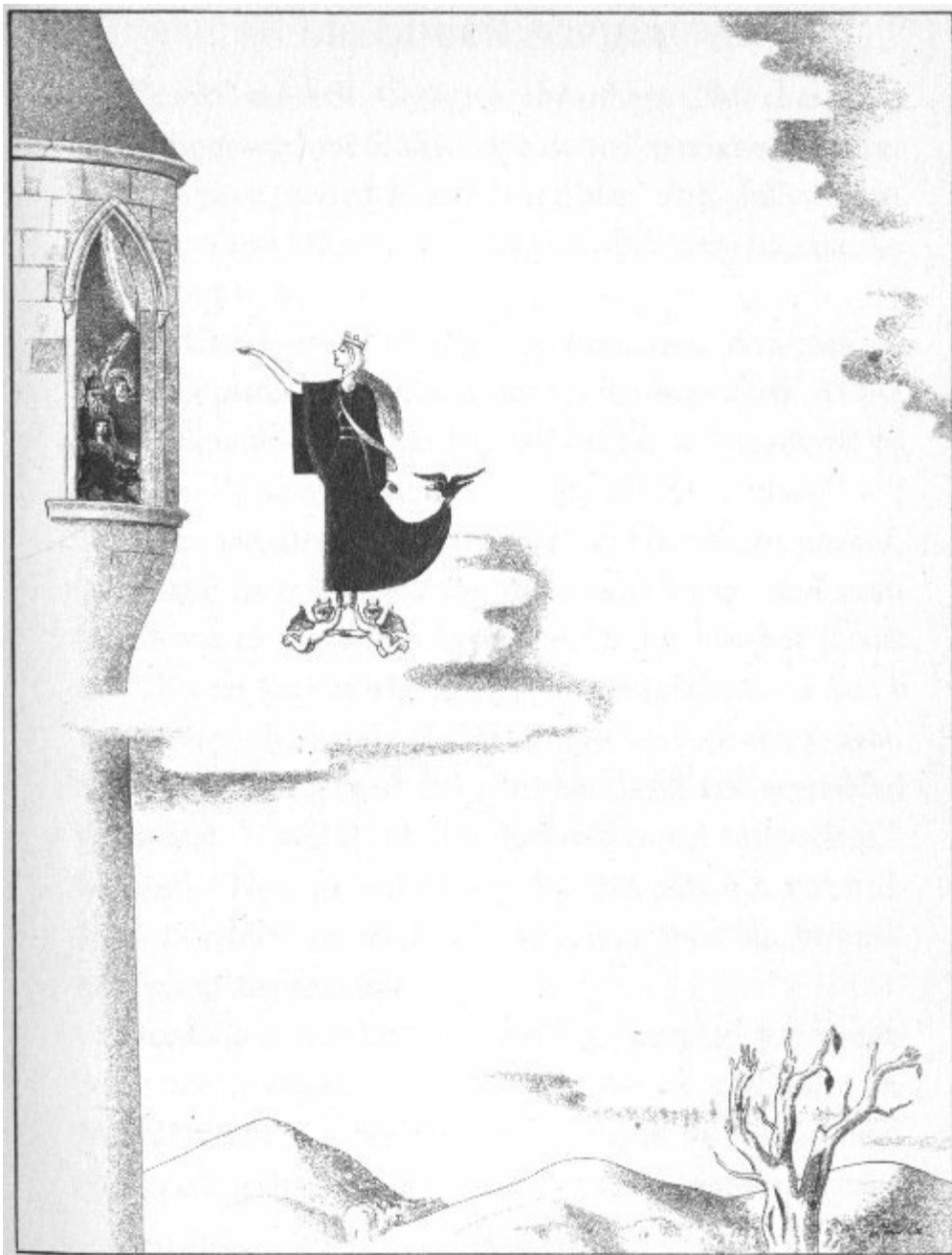
The woman smiled at him, and as she smiled the likeness to his sister faded away. She grew taller, and she grew beautiful. So radiantly lovely did she become at last that the three watchers were dazzled. They made no move to check her as she walked, still smiling at the King, toward the open window. The cat Thomas jumped to the floor as she approached, and darted under the table. Circe stepped over the low sill and stood outside—stood upon empty air. Then she spoke, and her voice was like the sound of a golden bell.

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“Good-by, my Rupert,” she said, “I underrated your intelligence, and you have won the first encounter. But it would have been better for you had you lost it and become a carp in my ponds.” She turned to the Princess. “I should like to have seen Thomas eating you,” she remarked wistfully, “but perhaps that pleasure is merely postponed. As for your ignorant English husband—” but St. George was reaching for the big silver fish knife, and Circe’s dignity vanished at the sight. She ducked like any urchin and then sank downward out of sight.

Limping Leopold rushed in. “What have you done with the Princess?” he shouted. He held a long sword in his hand, and with this he thrust fiercely at St. George. The Knight sidestepped and flicked downward with the heavy fish knife. He

struck, not at the thrusting weapon, but at the wrist behind it; and Leopold's sword-bearing hand leapt from its arm. The man turned to fly, but he was too late. The fish knife split his head from poll to neck, and he pitched forward lifeless to the stone floor.



“Quick!” cried St. George to the others. “We shall have to fight our way out of this.” He darted to where the silver

javelin rested, seized it and brandished it joyfully. Then he remembered that it was Cleodolinda's weapon, and he held it out to her.

But Cleodolinda, at that moment, was occupied in throwing plates at the flower pot on the high shelf. At the third attempt she knocked it off, and it fell shattered to the floor. "Thomas! Thomas!" she cried. "It is down!"

Thomas needed no calling. As the pot struck the ground, he sprang from beneath the table, and bit off and swallowed one of the yellow blossoms. He bit off—but it was not Thomas the cat who seized the second flower: it was a large, ungainly, poorly clad man down on all fours upon the ground. He gulped down his mouthful and scrambled to his feet. "I will thank your Royal Highness afterwards," he cried. "Now we must hurry; for this palace is not real. It is an edifice of witchcraft, and may crumble beneath our feet at any moment."

Cleodolinda nodded, and, turning, accepted the javelin from her husband with a little smile of gratitude. St. George made the big fish knife whistle in the air, and then, noting that the King had no weapon of silver, handed the utensil to him. "More suited to your style than to mine, sire," he said, by way of excuse; and, turning to the table, he collected swiftly a handful of little silver fruit knives. The man Thomas took the fish fork.

An extraordinary babel of sound was coming up from the hall below. It sounded inhuman, like animals trying to talk. The King opened the double door, and recoiled. "Saints preserve

us, what a crew!" he muttered. Then his brow flushed red with wrath, and he bent his knees for a spring.

"Wait!" said St. George, and the King obeyed. The Knight advanced to the head of the stairway, the others on his heels. He burst into a roar of laughter. "Heavens!" he cried. "Just look at them." Cleodolinda looked, but saw nothing to arouse amusement.

Crowding round the foot of the stairway was a horde of creatures wearing the livery of Queen Sophia. They were human in general appearance, if to be human is to possess two arms and to stand erect on two feet. But there was none who did not suffer from some grotesque deformity, and some of them had animals' faces. All were armed, and at the sight of the four standing at the stairhead they surged forward. Then they paused; for the four did not look like a party to be attacked with impunity.

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St. George laughed again. He balanced one of the fruit knives in the palm of his hand, as if he were testing its weight. Then his arm shot forward, and the knife darted through the air with the swiftness of a swallow's flight. It took a wolf-headed man full in the throat. The creature fell gurgling; and, before it had touched the ground, another knife was on its way. This buried itself in the stomach of a dwarf with a foot-wide mouth and monstrous, chisel-shaped teeth. He began to howl horribly. A female thing, gesticulating at them with hands as large as hams, was the next victim. She fell backward with a knife in her chest, and the hands flapped convulsively against the floor. The horde broke, ducking as the Knight's arm went back for the fourth time. "Jump at them!" he cried sharply,

and the four sprang down the stairway. They felt it wobble beneath their feet as they went. The marble steps had become soft—it was like running down a pile of bolsters. But the hellish crew did not await the charge. They scattered in all directions, shrieking, cackling and grunting; and the four rushed through them, out the hall door, and on toward the drawbridge. “Stop them, Stephen! Stop them!” yelled a voice behind. The corpulent, stuttering man who had met them on their arrival stood now in the middle of the bridge. He peered at them over a huge shield, while brandishing in his right hand an enormous battle-ax. St. George sent a knife whizzing towards his face, and he ducked behind his protection. The King, seizing the opportunity, hurled himself against the raised shield; and Stuttering Stephen toppled sideways from the bridge into the dry river bed below. The four did not wait to administer any *coup de grâce*. They rushed on, and not until they were a hundred yards from the bridge did they turn their heads.

The palace was still there; but one of the brighter moonlit clouds was showing through it from behind. As they watched, the walls grew thinner and thinner until, presently, there stood no more than a castle of light mist. This melted swiftly away, and the four found themselves upon a flat and empty moor. Even the dried-up watercourses had vanished. Overhead was a thin wailing, and something like a flock of large geese flew swiftly away to the east.

“I know where we are,” said the King. “This moor is five miles from the real palace. Saints in heaven, what a trap!”

Chapter V

THE FLIGHT FROM THE MOOR

They stood upon a low mound. Each faced outward; for this moonlit moor smote upon their senses as a landscape saturated with evil. The water between the peat-hags gleamed secret wickedness; the tussocks themselves stared open menace. St. George, with a knife still balanced in his palm, shot quick glances to right and left. The King, eyes fixed ahead, spoke to him in a lowered voice.

“That was a queer performance of yours,” he said. “I have never seen the like before.”

“A knave’s trick, sire,” replied the Knight. “I learned it from a Spanish brigand whom I had rescued from rival brigands. He wished to show his gratitude. But I never thought to have to use it.”

“It is a perfectly permissible trick when dealing with scum like that,” declared the King. “By the bones of St. Anthony! there must have been a hundred of them.”

The tall, poorly clad man made a noise in his throat. Then he spat upon the ground.

“A hundred!” he cried. “Does your Majesty not know that every witch and wizard from every part of the wide earth is loose in this miserable land?”

“You speak riddles,” snapped the King. “What do you mean by ‘loose’? But wait. First and foremost, who are you?”

“My name is Thomas,” replied the man, “and I am a gardener.”

“Ah!” said the King. “You have, then, a daughter called Miranda?”

The man turned his head and stared suspiciously at the monarch. “What do you know of Miranda—sire?” he growled.

“Naught,” replied the King, “save that she loves one Walter, lately a captain of my archers.”

“A right worthy man, sire,” said Thomas, “and one much interested in flowers. But alas! my poor Miranda will never wed him now.” His voice choked.

“Tell us your story, please, Thomas,” interposed Cleodolinda.

“But be brief,” added the King.

“My father,” said Thomas, “was a man most learned in the history of witches, and he passed his knowledge on to me. Hence, when a certain witch accosted me one night, I knew her for what she was. I saw, also, what must have happened; and hastening home with all speed, I stocked my

cottage with provisions, and diverted a small stream so as to surround the building with running water. This I forbade Miranda to cross, warning her of the dangers which lay without. But, alas! who can reason with a maid in love? One evening I missed her, and guessed rightly that she had gone to keep her usual tryst with her beloved Walter. I seized my weapon—a pitchfork with silver prongs which I had made the day before—and I hurried toward the river bridge. Before long I spied the damsel walking half a mile ahead. Alas! at that very moment, Whimpering Willie darted from the bushes beside the road and sped after my poor child, shrieking as usual, ‘Help! help! The witches are after me! Hold my hand!’ I roared at him; I hurled my pitchfork; I started to run, but I might as well have tried to catch the wind. In a moment he overtook her; and, as she turned at his approach, he slowed his pace and took on the gait of an exhausted child. Out of breath as I was, my shouts did not reach her.

“I saw her stoop soothingly and extend her hand. He seized it; and a moment later my child had vanished, and a white rabbit dangled by one paw in the little demon’s grasp. He turned his head backward—that is a trick of his—and grinned at me, bringing his other hand to the rabbit’s neck as if to throttle the little creature. Then he changed his mind, cast the rabbit away and shouted, ‘Keep her in a hutch in remembrance of me.’ Thereafter, he fled away yelling with laughter. I pray that I may get my hands upon him yet. I will see how many times one must twist his head round until it unscrews altogether.”

“A pious resolve,” said the King approvingly, “but useless, I fear. Because—”

“No!” said Cleodolinda loudly and firmly. She kicked her father on the ankle as she spoke.

“Because,” amended the King hastily, “because—oh! well—why *should* it do any good?”

“When witches or warlocks are killed,” explained Thomas, “their spells cease to work, and those who have been metamorphosed regain their natural shape.”

“Met a *what*?” asked Cleodolinda.

“Greek,” said her father shortly. He was watching a reed that waved oddly in the nightmare stillness of the moor.

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“Greek, meaning ‘changed in outward form.’ But how came you, Thomas, to understand Greek?”

“One of my father’s books of witch-lore was written in Greek,” replied the man, “and he taught me to read it.”

“Yet, knowing all this, you fell into Circe’s snares?” queried the King.

“I was a fool,” cried the man bitterly. “She sent, saying that Queen Sophia had heard of my loss and offered the aid of her court magician. I should have guessed the truth, when Limping Leopold met me at the gate—for his picture is in my father’s books—but I was distracted with grief, and had no thought for anything save my child. I took a glass of wine from—as I thought—Queen Sophia’s hand. The rest you know.”

“Yes,” replied the King, frowning. There were six or seven

reeds waving now, and these were widely separated. He turned to St. George. "Do you see?" he muttered.

"Yes, I see," replied the Knight. "We are committing one of the major errors of war, which is to stand still and do nothing while the enemy prepares new plans. Let us move—backward or, as I should suggest, forward."

"Forward, of course," assented the King. "You, Thomas, lead! You know the country best. St. George, can you carry Cleodolinda? Her feet are bleeding again. I shall act as rearguard. Are you ready? Then—march!"

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"No!" said St. George. "*Run!*"

He snatched up the Princess and darted forward. Thomas, startled by the sharp command, lumbered after the Knight. But, to the King, all orders were things addressed to other people; he stood frowning at a rapidly extending crescent of shaking reeds. A moment later Thomas was again by his side. The gardener had leapt back into the threatened area.

"The bog is closing in upon us," he bawled into the King's ear; and his Majesty, suddenly alive to his peril, joined Thomas in a dash to the barrier of rocking rushes which separated them now from St. George and the Princess. They jumped together; and, as they did so, the barrier broke inward like a wave, and they glimpsed beneath them roots tossing in a mass of surging slime. They alighted safely on the outer side.

Then, from behind them, there came an ugly noise. It was a squeal of baffled rage.

Cleodolinda, her face pallid in some strange illumination, pointed with open mouth. They wheeled about.

Hovering in the air above the mound was a pale, blue flame. It was all aquiver—dissolving into waving tongues and then re-forming into steadier shape. And the shape, at its steadiest, was that of a malicious gnome's face. The eddy of tumbling rushes closed in about the mound, and that mound sank out of sight with a loud sucking noise. The face of lambent flame was blown aloft by some sudden updraft. Then it descended, steadied again, and opened its mouth in another squeal of fury.

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“I wonder,” said St. George thoughtfully. The others glanced at him. He was balancing on the palm of his hand the last of his little silver knives. “Can one slay fire with a dagger?” he asked. “Oh, well! one can but try.” His arm shot out; and the knife flew straight into, and straight through, the snarling face. Its passage left no visible trace; but, a moment later, the flame twisted into a writhing knot and then suddenly went out. Beneath where it had been, the mound rose slowly into sight again, the bog water streaming down its reed-plastered sides.

“Ha!” cried St. George joyfully. “This is better than dragon-fighting. Never, not even in my wildest dreams, did I hope to kill a will-o'-the-wisp.”

“You know its name, then?” exclaimed the surprised King.

“That is what the people of Lincolnshire used to call it—so my grandmother told me,” replied the Knight. But he

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looked puzzled. "From Lincolnshire to Africa is a far cry," he muttered.

"I can explain that," said Thomas.

"And I want to hear," commented the King. "But not now. It would serve us better for the moment if you could show us some way to the castle less dangerous than the path across these moors."

The question carried its own answer; because, obviously, the only other approach was along the banks of the river running through the gorge on their left. All three heads were turned in that direction.

"There is danger, also, by that river," said Thomas, "but it is a danger of which we should have fair warning."

"That would be preferable," replied the King. "It is these traps and ambushes and strange surprises which are so irritating to the temper."

The Princess smiled. She knew that her father meant precisely what he said. He had no nerves, and did not know the meaning of fear.

"We could bathe Cleodolinda's feet down there," added St. George. He hoisted her to his shoulder as he spoke.

"Two hundred paces ahead of this we should find a path leading to the gorge," vouchsafed Thomas.

"But there is a dragon in the path," remarked Cleodolinda.

The others glanced up at her questioningly. They thought that she was speaking in metaphor. But she was quite in earnest. From her perch she could see what the reeds hid from the others.

“I mean it,” she said. “It is another fire-breathing dragon. I wish—I wish—”

She did not complete her sentence; but St. George could feel her trembling, and he understood. She would have died sooner than admit it; but she was a little nervous about fire-breathing dragons. All said and done, it was only a few days ago that she had been tied to a tree and inspected by one while it estimated the precise degree of roasting she would require before becoming palatable. It takes a little time to recover from an experience of that kind.

St. George transferred her to her father’s shoulder. “Stay here, my precious,” he said. “This, you will agree, is my particular business.” He drew his sword, grasping it dagger-wise. “A trifle long,” he remarked, “but it will serve. Come on, Thomas.” The pair trotted forward.

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“No, no!” cried Cleodolinda. “There is something wrong. I feel it. After them, father!” In her anxiety she spurred the King as if he had been a horse. But he needed no spurring. He did not want to be left out of anything; so, since his daughter assented, he bounded after the others with long strides.

He overtook them quickly, for Thomas had stopped and was holding back the Knight, clinging to him firmly with both hands. There was no doubt about the fire-dragon. It was an

enormous beast, and it lay a little way down the path, lower jaw along the ground, watching them with eyes which glinted balefully through the puffs of smoke rising from its nostrils.

“No, no!” Thomas was crying. “It is a trick: it must be a trick! It is *impossible* that so rare a beast as a fire-dragon should happen to be exactly there, exactly at this moment, just by mere chance.”

“There is something in that,” assented St. George. “But how are we to tell if it is or is not a real dragon?”

“Look at it, all of you!” cried Thomas. “You have seen fire-dragons. Is this one different? Is there anything lacking? Has it any deformity? If so, it is a witch, disguised, and hoping that you, sir, will run upon it with a steel sword, instead of with a weapon of silver.”

83

All, four stared anxiously at the monster. “I can see nothing wrong,” declared St. George.

“Neither can I,” affirmed the King.

“I can,” said Cleodolinda in a high, clear voice; and, at the sound, the dragon raised itself upon its forepaws.

“What?” cried the others.

“Its eyes are of different colors,” said Cleodolinda. “One is black and the other is green.”

They looked: and it was true.

“Ha!” cried St. George joyfully. He turned toward the Princess. “May I borrow your javelin, my love?” he asked. “Thank you.” Holding the weapon poised for throwing, he ran lightly down the path.

But the “dragon” did not wait for him to come within range. It wheeled to its left, unfurled its vast wings, and sped away over the moor. It ran on its forelegs with its wings flapping, and with the rest of its long body trailing on the ground. It passed round the watchers in a wide semicircle, making for the east. It gathered speed as it went, and soon it was growing smaller in the distance—growing very small—growing too small for reason—until—was it a dragon or was it an old woman with loosened shawl flapping in the wind of her flight, and with one end of that shawl trailing behind her on the ground? They rubbed their eyes; but, when they looked again, she had become a mere speck in the distance, and that presently vanished.

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St. George turned to Thomas. “Thank you. You saved my life,” he said. “And you too—” he added, turning to Cleodolinda, “for the second time this night.”

“There’s no call for gratitude,” mumbled Thomas. “Do not forget that, if it had not been for the quick wits of the Princess your wife, I should be still”—he shuddered—“a cat.”

“Thanks can wait,” interrupted the King. “Thomas saved me five minutes ago, and he knows I am grateful. He saved us all earlier, when, as a cat, he dug his claws into my leg. St. George and I would be stone now, if Cleodolinda had run less swiftly, or had been less expert with her javelin. It was St.

George's swiftness in attack that brought us through that horde in the sham palace. But Heaven knows what may happen to us yet if we stand here making pretty speeches. Forward!"

They hastened on to where an overflow of pine trees marked the edge of the ravine. Here St. George shifted Cleodolinda from his shoulder to his arms, for the descent of the steep slope was very difficult. However, they reached the bottom without mishap; and there the Knight set the Princess on a rock by the edge of the tumbling, moonlit water, removed her sandals and began to bathe her swollen feet. She heaved a sigh of relief.

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"That is heavenly," she said. "And it is heavenly, too, to have done with that horrible moor. How peaceful it is here. But I am forgetting. Thomas! You said that there was danger here also. What is that danger?"

Thomas seated himself upon another rock. "There is a fisherman," he replied, "who patrols the edges of this river, and he is an enemy more terrible than any that, so far, we have met. But he is a noisy fellow, talking loudly to himself as he fishes, bewailing his misfortunes and exulting in his successes. So we shall have fair warning if he comes."

"Why, we *heard* him," said St. George, "barely an hour ago and not far from here. He cried, 'Ha! there's a fine salmon!'"

"Was it 'Ha!' that he said?" asked Thomas. "It would more likely have been 'Och!'"

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"It may have been 'Och!'" said St. George, "but 'Och!' is

Irish.”

“And *he* is Irish,” cried Thomas. “He comes from Eire, a strange island far to the north—an island where it rains day and night, and no man sees the sun.”

“Oh! but that story is exaggerated,” said the Knight. “I know Eire. It is the country of St. Patrick. He cleared it of serpents, you know—a more dangerous task than mere dragon-killing. But how came this man to be here, in Africa?”

Thomas glanced at the King. “That is part of a long story,” he said.

“Yes,” said the King. He threw himself down on a bed of drifted pine needles as he spoke. “Leave that; but tell us in what way he is dangerous.”

“‘Fishing Phelan’ is his name,” began Thomas. “It is all in one of the books, and I remember every word of it. He was a bad man; cruel to his wife and children, and deceitful to his neighbors. He cared for nothing but fishing. They do this in that country with a pole, long and pliant as a bamboo. To this is attached a cord, much longer than the pole, and of the thickness of a bowstring. To the farther end of this they tie a small metal hook hidden in feathers. Phelan was skilled above all his fellows in the casting of his hook. He could snare with it a bird upon the wing.”

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“It came to pass, one day, that his wife lay dying; and that the priest came to administer the last rites. When Phelan saw him at the door, he swore a vile oath, ‘This is no place for the likes of me,’ he cried, and he took his fishing gear and made off to

the river. There he had no success, and his temper went so that he swore without ceasing. Suddenly he found a stranger standing beside him on the bank.

“‘Good morning, Phelan,’ said the stranger.

“‘Go to the devil!’ replied Phelan.

“The stranger laughed harshly. ‘That would be a short journey,’ he said. ‘Now, Phelan, listen to me, for what I have to say will be to your advantage. Is it true that you have come out here to fish while your wife lies dying in your cottage?’

“‘Dyin’ she is,’ snarled Phelan, ‘may the devil fly away with her!’

“‘Why,’ cried the stranger, ‘you seem to be a man of my way of thinking! I am minded to do you a favor. Catch me one of yonder swallows!’ For there were birds flying low over the water.

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“Phelan looked at this man who gave him orders. He looked him up and down, and he saw that the stranger had a cloven hoof. Then he dared not disobey. So he raised his long, pliant rod, threw out the long cord and caught with the hook a low-flying swallow. The bird fell into the stream, and stayed there struggling.

“‘Marvelous!’ cried the stranger. ‘It is a shame that such skill should go day after day unrewarded.’

“‘It is that,’ said Phelan. ‘A bitter, black shame.’

“‘Watch then!’ said the stranger. And, as he spoke, the bird changed into a great fish tugging at Phelan’s cord.

“‘Och! there’s a fine salmon!’ cried Phelan, in great delight. ‘Is this a trick of your Honor’s magic?’

“‘It is a trick which I can help you to perform,’ replied the stranger. ‘But pull the salmon to the bank!’ And this Phelan did, although it took him twenty minutes in the doing.

“‘Now,’ said the stranger, as Phelan beat the salmon on the head with a stone, ‘this is the offer I make you. You shall have power to drag into any stream any living creature that you can catch with your hook within fifty paces of that stream’s banks. So soon as your victim touches the water you have but to cry, “Och! there’s a fine salmon!” and a fine salmon that creature shall become. You, on your side, shall pay, when you die, the usual price, which is your soul!’

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“Phelan thought it over, and shook his head. ‘It would be a merry life but a short one,’ he declared. ‘They would be after hangin’ me for a sorcerer before ever a year was out.’

“‘You are a good bargainer,’ said the stranger, ‘and I like you all the better for it. This, then, I shall add. No weapon or missile shall have power to harm you; no cord or chain shall have strength to bind you, no beast or bird or reptile shall have courage to attack you; and all sickness shall pass you by. Come, is it a bargain?’

“But Phelan still hesitated. ‘Sure and ’tis well known that your Honor is full of wiles,’ he grumbled, ‘and too cunnin’ for the likes of a simple man such as meself.’

“At that the stranger lost his temper. ‘You are a fool!’ he snarled. ‘Do you not see that, whether you accept or refuse, you will be mine in the end? What! Will you turn penitent and hie you whining to the priests?’ Phelan shook his head. ‘Then mine you *must* be. It is not for the sake of your soul that I make you this fine offer, but because you are more wicked than any in all this land and, with my aid, may work boundless evil upon mankind. Your soul! Bah! Your neighbors say that it is no larger than a pea—and a shriveled pea at that.’

“‘Say they so, indeed?’ cried Phelan in a fury. ‘And shall I be able to turn them into salmon for my catchin’?’

“‘Yes,’ said the stranger eagerly, ‘if you have cunning enough to entice them within fifty paces of the water’s edge, and skill enough to hook them there.’

“‘It is a bargain!’ shouted Phelan, stamping with rage. ‘I agree!’ And with that the stranger vanished, and a silence fell upon the scene, save for an echo—‘agree—agree—agree’ that tossed from side to side down the river gorge.

“Phelan turned homeward; and, as he journeyed, he saw the priest coming from the cottage toward him. An evil thought came into his mind.

“‘Reverend father,’ he called, ‘it’s sorry I am for my wrongdoin’. Do you come now and shrive me.’ And he got his rod and line ready.

“But the priest looked at Phelan, and threw up his hands in horror. ‘Saints preserve us!’ he cried, and turning, fled away

from the riverbank.



“Phelan stopped at a still pool and looked at his reflection in the water. He saw no change in his appearance. But the priest hurried to his village, and reported there that Phelan had become a sorcerer—a terrible creature nine feet high with a long and hairy snout. For the Powers who protect mankind affix a warning sign upon all who have traffic with the Evil One, yet none such lost soul is able to perceive his own deformity.”

The King had risen to his feet before Thomas ceased speaking, and was looking up and down the river. “So Circe,” he said musingly, “does not know that her hand is wrongly shaped.”

“Oh!” said Cleodolinda. “Was *that* how you discovered that she was not my aunt? I have been wondering.”

“She had five fingers and no thumb,” replied the King. “But this Phelan, Thomas? No weapon or missile can harm him? Does that mean that he is proof against silver?”

“So my father said,” answered Thomas.

The King frowned. “He was here a little while ago, and may be ahead of us now.”

“I doubt it, sire,” said St. George. “Salmon fishers follow a stream downward. We shall be traveling in the opposite direction.”

“Good!” said the King. “Then, if you are ready, Cleodolinda, let us get on.”

After a brief attempt to travel along the rough slopes of the ravine, the party decided to risk an unlikely meeting with Phelan and to follow the water's edge. Here the going was far easier; nevertheless, three more hours had elapsed, and the sky was paling in the east, ere they saw, a little way ahead, battlements and towers crowning a precipice which dropped sheer to the river bed. Down this cliff there tossed and tumbled two thin plumes of white water, showing where the tributary stream, split by the palace island, cascaded to its junction with the main river.

The entrance by drawbridge and gatehouse was, as imitated in the sham palace, from the moorland above the ravine; and thither, after retracing their steps to find an easier slope, the travelers climbed hopefully. But when the moor came into view they halted and, actuated by a common impulse, dropped back for consultation. For the palace was being watched—watched by six cowed figures strung out across the plain and standing motionless in the pale, misty blend of moonlight and impending dawn.

“Can we not rush them?” asked Cleodolinda. “We rushed the others.”

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“That was different,” replied St. George. “Those others were crowded together into a small space, and we took them by surprise. These are separated by hundreds of yards, and surprise would be impossible. Moreover, we have only one throwing weapon left, your javelin; and, if we hurled that, we should be reduced to a large knife and a fork as weapons for the four of us.”

“You are right,” agreed the King. “Close-quarter fighting is not our game with creatures such as these. We must avoid battle until we can get silver arrows forged at the palace.”

“They will depart at dawn,” said Thomas. “All witches, save Circe, dislike the daylight. But, if your Majesty does not wish to wait till then, there is another entrance to the palace. It is a secret sally port. These witches are all strangers to the country and are unlikely to know of this hidden door. It lies at the bottom of the precipice, midway between the two waterfalls, and is hidden from view by a pile of boulders arranged to look as if they had fallen from above.”

The King glanced toward Cleodolinda where she stood dropping with fatigue and shivering in the before-dawn wind. “That child will be ill,” he whispered to St. George, “unless we can get her quickly into bed.” Then he added aloud. “Lead on, Thomas! But how do we pass the waterfall?”

94

“There is a path hewn out in the rock behind it,” said Thomas.

“An old device,” commented St. George. The four began to descend the slope again.

* * * * *

Queen Sophia knelt in the palace chapel. She knelt at a prie-dieu with her arms thrown forward resting on the book between them.

“Send help!” she sobbed in an abandonment of misery. “Send help! I am but an ignorant woman, and I know not how to save my people from these honors.”

The heavy curtain at the chapel door stirred and parted. Sir Rudolph, the seneschal, stood there looking at the Queen. Then he tiptoed clumsily toward her. She heard his footsteps, and raised her head.

“Your Majesty,” he whispered, “I fear—I fear I know not what. But—*some creature is pounding at the sally port door.*”

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The Queen sprang to her feet. “It will be no witch,” she cried. “A witch could not pass the waterfall. It will be—Oh! I know, I am certain! It is the help for which I prayed! Come! Come quickly.” She seized one of the many lighted candles and, shielding the flame with her fingers, hurried from the chapel.

* * * * *

“I cannot help it,” cried the King. “Phelan or no Phelan, I must make them hear.” He raised his mace and thundered anew upon the door.

“There is a light approaching,” said St. George, pointing to the narrow space between door and doorstep.

“Who is there?” came a quavering voice from within. “I warn you that I am armed.”

“We are friends,” roared the King. “Open quickly.”

“*Rupert!*” shrieked a second voice. “Here, give me the key!” A moment later the door was flung open and Queen Sophia stood in the aperture, holding a flickering candle above her head. “*Rupert!*” she cried again. “Oh, joy!”

“Give me the candle,” said the King. He took it from her shaking hand, and retained that hand in his own. “Yes, it is I, Sophia (one, two, three, four and a thumb). We have fought our way through to this safety, and I flatter myself that we are useful reinforcements. Here is Cleodolinda, turned into a very Amazon. Here is St. George of England. He has killed five of the enemy tonight. Here last, but not least, is Thomas the Gardener, a man who knows more of the ways of witches than does any in our two countries.” He took Sophia in his arms. “Have no more fear, my sister. We shall protect you, and we shall win this war.”

Chapter VI

THE HERMIT'S DIARY

Cleodolinda, after her feet had been properly dressed and bandaged, was packed off to bed without further ado. There she fell asleep when halfway through a bowl of hot broth, and she did not reopen her eyes until an hour before noon.

The King and St. George, old campaigners, had no thought of going to rest before they had performed certain elementary duties. Accompanied by the seneschal, they inspected the store of silver in the treasury—a gratifyingly ample supply. They roused the chief armorer, discussed with him the manufacture of silver-headed arrows, and arranged that this work should be started at daybreak. Then they made a round of the palace defenses; and, as they journeyed, Sir Rudolph gave them a brief account of the invasion. This, he said, had occurred some five months ago, the day after the last of a series of tremors which had followed the big earthquake. He stopped at a tower room where a deaf, blind and apparently witless old man sat crooning to himself, and explained that this wreck was the Court Magician, who had been the first of the enemy's victims. He had been seen at sunset, giving alms to an old woman outside the palace moat, and had wandered back across the drawbridge, an hour later, in his present pitiable condition. That same night a horde of

strange creatures had raced yelling across the moor—charging upon the palace. They had halted, with shrieks of dismay, at the running water of the moat; and, presently, had scattered over the countryside. Since then, there had appeared, each evening, a row of grim sentinels who watched the palace throughout the night but fled eastward at the first streak of dawn. On hearing this tale, Thomas suggested a quick search through the palace library for possible duplicates of his father's books. Thither they wended; but the quest was unsuccessful. Satisfied, at last, that there was nothing more to be done that night, the three weary travelers shared a light meal with Sir Rudolph and thereafter sought their beds.

At noon, the four men, Queen Sophia and the Princess (on a couch with her feet up) held conference in the privacy of one of the royal apartments; and Thomas was bidden, at last, to tell the tale he was burning to recount.

“Spare no detail,” advised the King. “Quote with exactitude where your memory will serve, as you did in the story of Fishing Phelan.”

99

Thomas, nothing loath, took the chair which was offered him and began.

“Some sixty years ago,” he said, “there dwelt, in the desert which lies to the east of this palace, a holy hermit. He let none know his name, and that fact will give you some measure of his holiness. He held that fame engendered pride, and that pride was the deadliest of snares. For that same reason he did not become a recluse, as do other hermits. He feared that complete withdrawal from his fellows might lead him to

regard himself as a superior person. He divided his time, therefore, between labors among the poor (he was skilled in the treatment of sickness) and periods for study in the solitude of his desert hut. Thus, he lived and died secure from worldly notoriety; but his fame among the Powers of Good and the Powers of Evil grew mightily.

“This humility of his might well have deprived us of all knowledge of the strange adventure which befell him, for he was averse to keeping records of his life. But, fortunately, he was also a man of much common sense; and, when the adventure began, he decided that an account of this might be of service to other folk. He gave that reason as a preface to his report. The record itself covered scarce more than the space of one week. My father’s copy thereof begins abruptly thus:

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““This day (Friday) there came to me across the desert one wearing a hermit’s garb; but I could sense the evil of him from afar. He had with him a phial; and this he offered to me, saying that one drop therefrom would cure any of the sick among whom I was wont to labor. I replied that it would be better that the sick should die than that they should be cured by a quack peddling broth from hell. At this he became very angry, and after much abuse of myself, vanished so incontinently that it was as if his rage had burned him up. I gave thanks for my deliverance, and returned to my reading.

““*Saturday.* This morning, to my surprise, I heard a tinkling of silver bells; and, looking up, I saw, approaching, a cardinal accompanied by six acolytes. He halted before me and announced that he was empowered to

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offer me a bishopric, adding that I must go with him as speedily as might be. With that, he held out his ring for me to kiss. I told him that his hand reeked of sulphur (as it did), and that I should be grateful if he would remove it from my vicinity. He threatened me with excommunication. I challenged him to speak the words; whereupon his acolytes turned to him, watching him with evil grins. This he saw also, and drawing himself up (albeit with a frightened face) essayed to utter the Latin formula. But the words choked him, so that he fell forward and died. His imps fled away cackling with laughter; but returned anon and strove to pelt me from afar with stones. The stones turned to sand in their fingers, and presently they departed.

“*Sunday.* This day the enchantress Circe came to me in the guise of a young girl, heavily veiled. She said that she was minded to become a nun; but that her parents were opposed. She asked me to consider her case and to advise, and she begged me to refresh myself meanwhile with some little cakes which she held out to me. I had no need to look at her deformed hand in order to know her for what she was, because the evil radiated from her like heat from a fire. I was about to tell her to go and seek easier prey when I realized that the very thought meant that I had become puffed up with pride at my two earlier successes. Horrified at the nearness of my escape, I retired to my hut, confessed my iniquity and asked for the help I should have supplicated earlier. Then I came out and told Circe that she was indeed evil and must leave me. At that she fell weeping, vowing that I misjudged her. Then, suddenly, throwing aside her veil, she asked if I could see any evil in beauty such as hers. I replied truthfully that I could see much evil and no beauty at all.

“I do not know why this mild reproof should so greatly have enraged her; but her face lit up with a fury more awful than any I had seen before on any countenance, human or inhuman. She screamed that never in all her agelong life had any man so greatly insulted her, and she vowed that I should pay the price. With that she stamped thrice upon the ground; and her third stamp was echoed by a thud like that of a falling rock. Glancing in the direction of the sound, I saw that a little way off a gigantic footprint, pointing toward me, had appeared in the smooth sand. The next moment there was another thud and a second footprint appeared ten yards nearer. To me it seemed that this was a device fit only to scare babes, so I returned to the reading of my book. The thudding continued, but it came no nearer. Circe began to scream abuse at the invisible giant; but that served her not a whit.

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“I read till eventide; and then, looking up, I saw that I was surrounded by a whole host of afreets and jinns, all mouthing spells at me. Circe was waving her arms without ceasing, and at each wave some new monster appeared on the outer edge of the crowd. I saw amongst them the costumes of Persia and of India and of China, and I marveled that the world should hold so many undesirable denizens. But curiosity may become a vice; and, remembering this, I ceased to regard the evil throng, and betook myself to my pallet in the hut. There I slept soundly throughout the night.

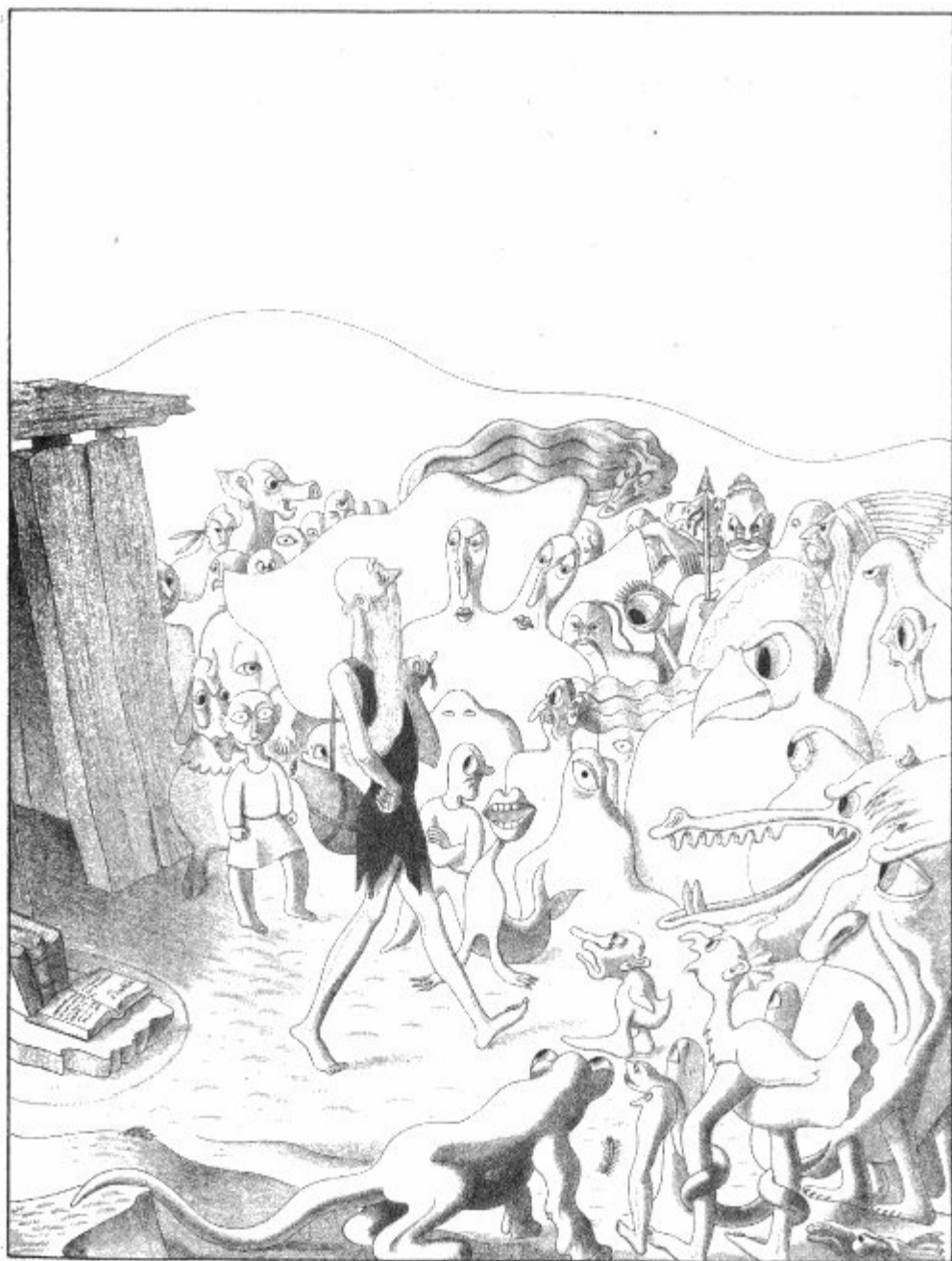
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“*Monday.* This morning Circe called long and loudly to the south, and there came to her a strange multitude of Negro savages. Some of these were tall men with black rings on their heads and some were small and wizened like dwarfs. Then

she turned and called toward the west, and there appeared presently many savages of a reddish tinge, having faces like unto eagles and wearing headdresses of colored feathers. The afreets made place for these new reinforcements, and all the savages set themselves to conjure up a great storm of hail and lightning. At this task they proved themselves very expert. But the lightning and the hail swerved away from the hut and struck among the afreets, and these shouted angrily to the savages, bidding them cease their spells. Then Circe called toward the north; and, presently, the sky in that quarter was darkened by a vast flock of pale men and women riding through the air upon very strange steeds, namely, *brooms*. This crowd descended, and with their brooms they swept into the air great clouds of sand. But, although they raised these clouds to windward of the hut, the sand blew back in their faces, so that soon, gasping and choking, they were obliged to desist.

“‘Toward midday I saw that my water gourd was empty. So I drew a circle in the sand enclosing my hut and the flat rock upon which lay my books, and forbade any to cross it. Then I took my gourd and made my way toward the watercourse which ran a mile to the west. The crowd glared at me and mouthed curses upon me; but they parted to let me through. To my surprise Circe did not urge them to stop me. But she followed me; and, when I stooped above the watercourse, she screamed loudly for someone named Phelan. Forthwith there appeared on the bank some twenty paces from me a man nine feet high with a hairy snout. He waved a bamboo in the air, flicking backward and forward a long thong attached to the upper end of this rod. Apparently, there was a sharp hook at the end of this thong; for, presently, in

one of his backward flicks, the hook became attached to his snout, and he dropped the bamboo with a yell. Circe burst into tears; and, at that, all the crowd began to moan. I returned with my water to my hut.



“Toward evening there began a squealing so appalling that even the afreets, who excel in the making of strange

noises, were plainly horrified. Looking up, I perceived that the uproar came from a large man from whose face red hair stood out in all directions like a flame. He wore round his thighs a short, woman's petticoat, and the noise came from a bag which he squeezed between his arm and his ribs. These horrible sounds were my first real trial. They interfered with my reading. But soon I bethought me to stuff my ears with shreds torn from the edge of my garment; and thereafter I was at peace again.'"

Thomas paused. "There is a gap in the records then," said he. "Apparently the hermit saw nothing new worthy of noting. He starts again on the following Thursday, and this is what is written then.

"*Thursday*. It is now six days since this persecution began; and, from Sunday onward, the clamor of angry curses and frenzied incantations has continued day and night without ceasing. Circe, foolish with hate, has granted neither to herself nor to her assistants a moment's relaxation. But it was clear to me this afternoon that all these creatures were tiring. Many of them, I noticed, would begin an incantation, forget the words, and sink down exhausted on the sands. Circe herself ceased not to urge them on, flogging them with her tongue; but her voice was growing so weak that few could have heard her.

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"*Friday*. During the night I had a dream in which was shown to me the task that this day I must perform. When I awoke, I found that all noise had ceased; and, when the sun rose, it shone upon a very strange scene. Of the evil creatures—and they numbered many thousands—most lay prone upon the

sands and the remainder sat staring in witless fashion, turning their heads this way and that as if they would fain depart but had no strength or intelligence to move. I judged that such complete collapse was due to something beyond mere bodily exhaustion. They had made a discovery stunning indeed to wits so poor as theirs. They had realized at last that, in the haste and fury of their desire to injure all better than themselves, they had paid the highest of prices for powers which, when directed against even the most ordinary holiness, were utterly useless.

“I took my staff and bade the creatures follow me. This they did—like sheep. Such was their state that they would have followed any who spoke to them with authority. But they shivered, despite the sun’s heat, for they feared that I purposed to destroy them. That, however, would have been grave presumption upon my part; and I aimed merely at carrying out the commands I had received in my dream. Therefore, when I had led them to where, a little away from my hut, a ridge of rock protruded from the sands, I halted, and proceeded to address them. I explained that it had been decided that so much accumulated evil and ugliness was unfairly offensive to the sun’s clean light; and that it would be best, therefore, to relegate the entire crew to a kingdom of their own beyond the reach of human gaze. There they would find vast caverns lit by jets of brilliant flame; there they would find still lakes around which white fruits grew upon bleached trees; and there they would have leisure to meditate upon their past folly and to perceive that malicious envy was the meanest of all sins. So saying, I struck with my staff a large boulder; and immediately this rock rolled aside and disclosed a passage cut in solid stone—a passage which

trended downwards toward the bowels of the earth. “This,” I said, “is mercy. Get you below!” Whereat the creatures, moaning, made their way into the passage, and Circe, whimpering helpless hatred, entered with them. A second blow from my staff caused the rock to roll back to its former position. Thereafter, using my finger, I traced upon this stone the invisible lines of the secret seal that no evil thing is able to pass, reciting meanwhile the ritual proper to the ceremony.

““Then I returned to my books.’

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“My father,” concluded Thomas, “made me learn those pages by heart. He said that the hermit was no fool and would have written nothing save what, one day, might be of value.”

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Chapter VII

THE KING TALKS

There followed a pause, during which the five listeners stared at one another with dismay growing upon their faces. Five pairs of lips opened to speak—and hesitated. Then Queen Sophia half rose from her chair, and sank back again.

““They numbered many thousands,”” she quoted in a whisper, ““and they are all loose! *Here!*””

“The holy hermit did not think to provide against earthquakes,” said Thomas bitterly.

“But—” cried the King, and paused, frowning. “Yes, there is something here which I do not understand. Judging from what you, Sir Rudolph, have told us, it must have been five months ago that the last of the earth tremors broke open the caverns and set the monsters free. Why, then, have they not scattered and gone back to the many parts of the earth from which Circe called them? That they have not done so we may guess; for only one witch, Howling Harriet, has been seen beyond my sister’s boundaries. But *why?*”

“I think, sire,” said St. George, “that this may be the explanation. Thomas has told us that it is the nature of

most witches and warlocks to dislike the light of the sun. We may assume, then, that each of the escaped creatures used to possess in its own country some hiding place in which it was wont to sleep by day. But none of these individual lairs can compare in convenience and security with the collective refuge afforded by the now-open caverns in which for sixty years they have been confined. Those caverns were especially equipped to meet the creatures' bodily needs. Moreover, they are practically impregnable. To force one's way into that underground country defended by the collective magical powers of several thousand monsters would be like trying to storm the mouth of hell. Why, long before you could find a quarry at which to loose a silver arrow you would be done to death in those dim passages. The walls would close together and crush you, or the roofs would fall and bury you, or you would step upon some cabalistic symbol and thereby open a bottomless pit. Such an adventure would be suicide. No, the enemy are bound to treat those caverns as their home and their fortress. They can make raids therefrom in the nighttime (remember how fast they can travel); but they will return thither at dawn."

"In that case," said the King, "our task must be to close the breach when all are safely inside."

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"Tracing thereafter," said Cleodolinda smilingly, "'the invisible lines of the secret seal that no evil thing is able to pass.'"

"Reciting meanwhile," added the Queen, "'the ritual proper to the ceremony.'"

The King frowned. "I am glad," said he, "that you two women are feeling better."

"If I may speak . . ." began Thomas. The others turned to him hopefully. "Well, then, we must bear in mind that these creatures were imprisoned as an act of *mercy*. They were given time to repent. They have broken loose, and their deeds show that they have not repented. It seems to me that the Powers who enclosed them might be unwilling to aid us in a scheme which would result merely in a renewed period of imprisonment, security and leisure."

"Thomas," said St. George, eying the man keenly, "you speak, I verily believe, from inspiration."

"If so, I was not aware of it," muttered the man, reddening. "It seemed to me but common sense."

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"Food!" cried the King. "How can we think when we are starving?"

The Queen rose. "Your pardon, Rupert," said she. "Lend me your arm. It is long past the hour, and our retainers also must be starving."

The little party moved toward the great hall, and the eyes of six hundred waiting folk brightened at the sound of approaching footsteps. St. George and the seneschal each offered an arm to the Princess. She slipped a hand within each; and, since both men were tall and strong, found herself almost walking upon air. Thomas followed behind; and, as the royal party advanced toward the table on the dais, left them, and turned toward the lower end of the hall. At that moment

the King looked back over his shoulder.

“What? What?” said the Monarch, frowning. “Come back, man!” he called. Then he spoke to the Queen in a low voice. She nodded, and the King drew his sword. “Kneel, man!” he commanded; and Thomas, puzzled but obedient, knelt.

The King smote him lightly on the shoulder with the flat of his blade. “Rise! Sir Thomas Gardener!” he roared. Six hundred voices yelled acclaim; for the tale of the night’s adventures had gone the round of the palace. St. George grabbed the blushing Knight with his free arm, dragged him to the dais, and planted him, finally, betwixt Cleodolinda and himself. “Fall to, brother,” he commanded, “for a knight must be able to eat well and to drink well, as well as to think well and be faithful.”

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Afterwards, when they were back in the Queen’s apartment, the King explained.

“You are my sister’s man, Sir Thomas,” he said, “although I am her suzerain and have power to knight you. But I have asked her to give you to me; because my castle has no garden at all, and I have need of a man who can plan and make a pleasance worthy of a royal residence. How say you? Will you be keeper of the King’s gardens? Neither money nor labor shall be lacking for the task. You agree? Then kneel, place your hands between mine, and repeat after St. George the words that pledge you to fealty.

“Now,” said the King, when the little ceremony had been completed, “the day is aging, and there is much to

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be done. Thank Heaven! I am a full man again, and can think.” He began to stride to and fro.

“Listen, now! All the witches and warlocks in the world are here, and are sleeping by day in one cavern. That fact outweighs everything else. Such a chance to destroy them may never occur again.

“We do not know yet how to set about that task: we shall have to watch and study and use our wits. But, meanwhile, the one thing we do not wish to have happen is that the witches should become scared of us, desert their cavern, and scatter once more over the face of the earth. Is that agreed?”

“Yes,” said the others; and, indeed, the fact was obvious once it had been put before them.

“Therefore,” said the King, halting, “until our plans for their destruction are completed, there must be no marching to and fro of regiments of archers armed with silver arrows, no sweeping of the forests with lines of elephants, no chasing of even single witches.”

“True enough,” said St. George gloomily.

The King recommenced his pacing. “We must seek for and discover the cavern; but the search must be secret, and the witches must not know it if we succeed.”

“Yes,” said St. George, but his face brightened again. He was seated on the edge of Cleodolinda’s couch, and she touched his hand in sympathy.

“But,” concluded the King, “while we leave *this* country safe for them, we must make the next country—mine—so dangerous that they shall have no temptation to cross the frontier betwixt the two. We must have lines of watch fires burning along that frontier guarded by groups of archers. We must have armies trampling through the woods by day. At night we must have imposing drives with the elephants. The mahouts must carry torches while the elephants thrash the undergrowth with lengths of silver chain. Sir Marmaduke Melchior should have charge, and his orders should go to him today.”

“All quite indisputable,” affirmed St. George. He glanced with raised eyebrows at Cleodolinda as the King wheeled away from them. “Do you know,” he whispered, “it would have taken me a week to see the essentials of the situation so clearly as that?”

“Perhaps,” replied the Princess in the same tone, “that was what Sir Marmaduke meant when he told me that Father was a ‘master strategist.’ But he does not think quickly in an emergency. You could win a fight before he realized that a fight had begun.”

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“The two kinds of quickness seldom go together,” said St. George, and ceased speaking as the King turned to them again.

“Sir Thomas, I shall ask you to be my messenger. But you will need to present a more knightly appearance. Go now with St. George, who will see to that. No armor, I think. You are unused to it, and it would hamper you.” He called back St.

George as the pair left the room. “Tell him about Miranda,” he whispered; and the Knight nodded and departed.

“Parchment, my good Sir Rudolph! Pens. Ink. Sand,” cried the King. “Sophia, you have twice my speed with the pen. Will you write to my dictation? We do not want to take a clerk into our confidence.”

* * * * *

“And that,” said the King, an hour later, “is—well, is that. Sir Thomas, here is a letter which you will give to my seneschal. It introduces you, confirms you in your appointment as keeper of the King’s gardens, and adds that you will be answerable to none but myself. It tells him that I appoint Sir Marmaduke Melchior to be my regent until I return. Finally, it bids him take you with all speed to Sir Marmaduke.

“Here is a letter which you will give into Sir Marmaduke’s own hands. Ask him to read it at once. It introduces you, and it appoints him regent. But it says nothing of what has happened, and tells no word of our plans. Such things I do not wish to entrust to writing. But the letter bids him take you to a private room where you will tell him all. It is for that reason that I have chosen you as my messenger. A man who can repeat word for word the story of Fishing Phelan and the whole of the hermit’s long record—as you did—must have a marvelous memory. Let us test that. Can you recite to us the plans I outlined in this room earlier this afternoon?”

“Yes,” replied Sir Thomas. He had been in expert hands for

the last half hour, and his appearance had altered greatly. His hair had been cut, and his beard trimmed to a point. He wore a loose silken tunic of pale green caught up at the waist by a belt of red leather studded with silver, from which there hung a pouch and a hunting horn. Crossed baldrics of similar material supported a short hunting sword, and a quiverful of the new, silver-tipped arrows. On his head was a hemispherical cap of red leather strengthened by arches of steel, and in his hand he carried a bow of superfine quality. He began to speak, pacing the room as the King had done.

“Listen, now! All the witches and warlocks in the world are here, and are sleeping by day in one cavern. That fact outweighs everything else.” He continued, word for word, through the King’s speech. Every inflection of voice was there: it was a marvelous performance.

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“Excellent,” said the King, smiling. “Impress upon Sir Marmaduke that all his maneuvers by day and by night will be merely spectacles to deceive the witches. We wish them to think that I am in a state of ignorant terror, unaware of how they came to be here, and aiming selfishly at no more than keeping them out of my own land. Moreover, none of our own people must have reason to suspect otherwise, lest the secret leak out and come to the enemy’s ears. That secret will be shared between him and us six only.

“You will have an escort of three archers who know my country. You will leave by the drawbridge over the northern brook, and travel north for two miles. There you will find that the main river bends eastward and becomes small and fordable. Crossing, you should be at the castle before

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sunset. Return early tomorrow, coming by the bridge. You will find Walter and Miranda, alas! close to that bridge. You have realized, I think, that we must needs kill *both* Howling Harriet and Whimpering Willie ere your daughter can be recovered.”

He clapped his hand upon Sir Thomas’s shoulder. “Have no doubt,” he said, “I mean to kill them all. Now go! Your escort awaits you below.”

Sir Thomas knelt, kissed the King’s hand and, rising, backed out of the room.

Cleodolinda smiled. “It is not words alone that he learns quickly,” she observed.

The King stretched his arms above his head. “Heavens! how I have talked.” He yawned. “My throat is arid as the hermit’s desert. I am hungry also.” He stood for a moment with bent brows as if perplexed by some new thought. “The interval betwixt supper and the midday meal is too long!” he announced explosively. “Why have I never seen that before? Do we not have wine and cakes betwixt breakfast and noon!”

“It is a great thought,” said St. George approvingly. But Sir Rudolph looked shocked.

“It has been a topic of conversation among women since the world began,” said Queen Sophia. “It was we who invented the midmorning repast, and were blamed by the men for gluttony. They have forgotten that. Someday they will urge us to eat and drink at midafternoon—because of our bodily frailty. Then they will join us and eat more than we,

saying that larger frames require greater sustaining. However, if you are minded to be pioneers, there is an uncut pasty, albeit cold by now, and there is wine to be had for the drawing.”

So they ate and they drank; and, thereafter, St. George picked up the Princess, and the whole party adjourned to the western battlements.

It was one of those curious afternoons when the unrealized haze which veils every normal landscape seems to have been washed clean away. Cleodolinda had seen this view many times before—had seen the soft woodlands of her father’s country (pepper tree, small chestnut and olive) sloping gently upward to a blue monotony of sky line—had seen the thin ribbon of the river winding westward from the volcanic wastes to the point where it entered the frontier ravine that ran from north to south past the precipice beneath her—had seen the volcano itself, a faint ethereal cone to the northeast. But now those woods formed no western skyline. They rose to a crest startlingly near, along which every tree stood out distinctly—a crest crowned by a white-domed tower. Beyond that there showed another crest of similar quality. A rise still more remote was fringed quite clearly with date palms. Thereafter came the dark cliffs of a low but barren tableland. To the north lay ridge beyond ridge of low jagged hills receding in steps to where, straight as a bowstring and blue as a turquoise, stretched the true sky line—the Mediterranean Sea. The volcanic cone to the northeast was nearer than any of those ridges, and it made, that afternoon, no pretensions to mystery. It rose, close at hand, a solid and towering monument of past terrors. Every streak upon its

surface was clearly distinguishable, and Cleodolinda noted with surprise that it was split to halfway down its southern side.

From the bottom of that cleft there poured a gray-white streak which was solidified lava. This ran down the lower slopes, widening as it came and heading straight for the palace. It mowed a huge swath halfway through a ragged forest of pines that straggled upward from the bottom of the mountain; but there it terminated abruptly. Somewhere in what remained of the forest, the river had its source. To the east the whole course of the little tributary stream which filled the palace moat could be traced most clearly. It, also, had a source somewhere among the lower slopes of the volcano. It ran southward at the start; but then curved round to the west and, so, came to the palace walls. Due east there lay a desolation of desert: a sea of rocks and sand dunes billowing away to a curved horizon, but clear-cut to the last. To the south could be seen the country they had traversed the night before; a country of alternate moor and forest growing ever more wild and more arid till it ran out at last into another desert of sand.

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St. George studied the scene for twenty minutes before he spoke. Then he asked whether the white tower was part of the King's castle.

"I do not know," replied the Princess. "I have never seen it there before today."

"It is Sir Marmaduke Melchior's observatory," explained Queen Sophia.

“He could signal to us from there, madam,” observed St. George.

“It is but rarely visible,” replied the Queen.

They stayed there, conversing sometimes in desultory fashion, while the sun sank lower and lower until the remote dark tableland became topped with fiery red. Above it a few tiny golden peaks, hitherto invisible, made their appearance. Then the sun’s disk touched and flattened; and, at that, Sir Rudolph arose.

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“It is time for the watchers to arrive,” he observed. “Would you wish to see this, sire?”

“Will you come, Sophia?” asked the King.

“No!” cried the Queen violently. “I have had my fill of horrors. But go, Rupert. You may learn something new.”

St. George looked at Cleodolinda and raised his eyebrows. She nodded. He picked her up, and followed the King and the seneschal to the southern battlements.

The moor was darkening, but the billows of the eastern desert were touched still by the red rays of the setting sun. That light died swiftly; and, as it faded, something like a large bird appeared flying low over the dunes, dipping out of sight and rising into view as it followed the contours. It approached rapidly; and, as it drew nearer, resolved itself into an enormous crow. Behind it came another, and behind that another, until there were six of these monstrous birds skimming along the southern boundary of the moor. Just

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before the foremost reached the ravine, all six checked with a great beating of pinions and dropped heavily to the ground. There each faced toward the palace, drew itself erect, folded its wings over its feet and turned, in the twinkling of an eye, into one of the cloaked and hooded figures which the little party on the battlements had seen the night before.

“They are beyond bowshot,” said St. George mournfully. “But one could get them easily if one went quietly down the ravine and crawled up through the woods behind them.”

“No,” said the King, “that would be against our policy. Defense only is our motto in this country.”

“Are there similar watchers on the northern side?” asked the Princess.

“Not similar,” replied the seneschal, “but there is a watcher there of another kind. Follow me if—” He hesitated and glanced at St. George. “Perhaps we had better leave the Princess here,” he murmured.

“No!” said Cleodolinda firmly. All four crossed to the northern battlements.

On this side of the palace there was no peat moor. The ground which sloped gently upward from the stream below the walls to the beginning of the ragged pine woods was a reddish clay sprinkled sparsely with small pebbles. No figure was to be seen thereon, and nothing stirred within the fringes of the pine wood. St. George glanced inquiringly at the seneschal and saw that Sir Rudolph was watching him with a grim smile. He turned his eyes again to the empty

terrain, staring this way and that. Suddenly something arrested his gaze. He craned forward. A queer pricking sensation started at the nape of his neck and crept upward over his scalp. With a sharp intake of breath, he pointed.

Leading straight toward them from the edge of the trees was a line of gigantic human footprints. Each mark was ten feet long and four feet broad. The prints ended fifty yards away, and *there were no return tracks.*

The Knight felt Cleodolinda grow rigid in his arms. He saw the King start forward, and a resounding oath smote upon his ears. Immediately, there came from below two earth-shaking thuds; and two more huge prints appeared, ending twenty yards nearer. The whole party sprang away from the parapet.

“Thunder and lightning!” ejaculated St. George, mopping his brow. “And the hermit,” he muttered, “turned his back upon *that* and went on reading!”

He wheeled toward the King. “Sire,” said he impressively, “it would go ill with us were we caught in the open by yonder monster on some ground where his footprints could not show. We must deal with the brute now, while we have this golden opportunity.”

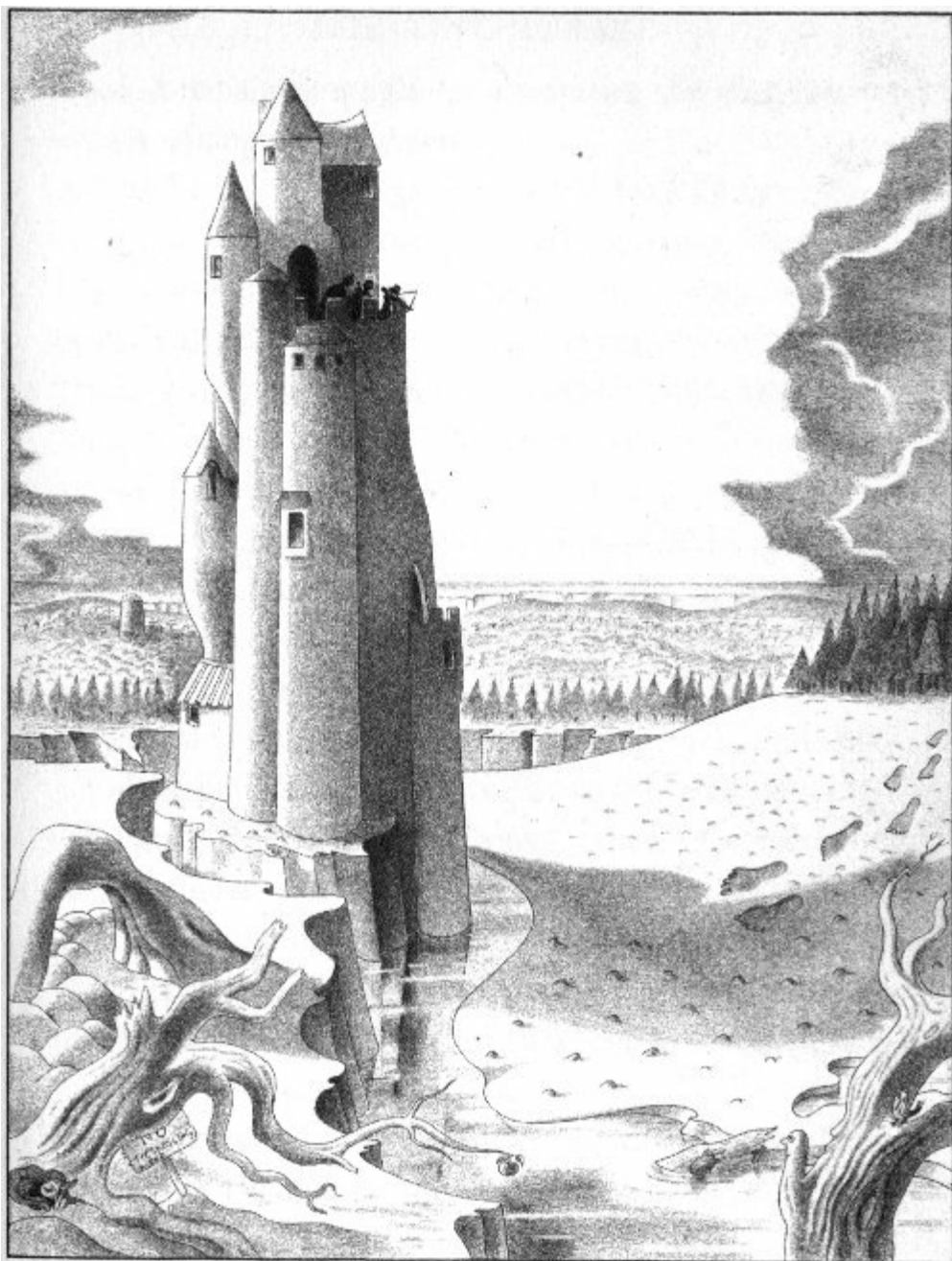
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The King nodded and gave a sharp order to the seneschal. Sir Rudolph departed at a run, and returned in three minutes carrying four bows and an armful of silver-headed arrows.

Cleodolinda seated herself sideways on the parapet. Her left shoulder was outward and her bow overhung the wall. She looked inquiringly at her husband. St. George, frowning,

measured with his eye a distance above the nearest footmark. That, he judged, should be the position of the monster's midriff. He loosed an arrow at this invisible mark. The shaft sped away and was lost among the pine trees. Nothing else happened. The Princess and Sir Rudolph shot ten yards higher; the King, ten yards lower. There was no result.

Cleodolinda bit her lip. Then, fitting another arrow to her bow, she leaned over the parapet and shot straight at the center of the nearest footprint. She saw the arrow point strike upon a stone which was being crushed into the clay; but the missile neither rebounded nor glanced away. Instead, it remained upright for a moment, and then rose in the air jerking up and down.



“Ha!” cried St. George. He shot at Cleodolinda’s leaping arrow. His shaft crossed hers and remained there

jerking up and down in unison. There came another tremendous thud below, and a new print appeared, but this was pointing away from the palace. Another thud followed and another print showed, a little more distant. The crossed arrows, still jerking in the air, were receding.

“He is hopping away!” shrieked Cleodolinda. The King and Sir Rudolph shot uselessly at the foot on the ground; uselessly, because that foot rested for only an instant in each print it made. St. George and the Princess shot steadily and repeatedly at the arrows which were jerking along in the air. There were six of such arrows in a leaping bunch ere the hopping monster gained the shelter of the pine trees.

St. George dropped his bow, threw his arms about the Princess and kissed her soundly. “Oh, you beauty!” he cried. “Oh, you quick-witted darling! Never had man such a wife!” The King grinned approval.

“But it was you,” said the glowing Cleodolinda, “who thought of shooting at the arrow in the air.”

“For mercy’s sake, explain!” interrupted the seneschal.

“What was it?”

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“Its feet were the only material parts it possessed,” replied St. George, “and even they were invisible.”

“Well, anyhow,” declared the King, “that was a perfect end to a very pleasant day. The monster will be lame for a fortnight. Let us to supper and to bed.”

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Chapter VIII

THE CONE

The next day dawned with every sign of impending rain. No expedition had been planned; Sir Thomas could hardly be back before noon; and Cleodolinda's feet, though healed, would need another twenty-four hours' rest before they could be relied upon for serious work. But the adventure of the previous evening had altered the situation considerably.

It might be taken for granted that the giant, suffering merely from a few needlelike spikes in one foot, had succeeded in hopping his way back to the shelter of the witches' cavern. His starting off in a northeasterly direction—toward the pine woods at the base of the volcano—was no contradiction; he could not cross the little stream which fed the palace moat, and would have to work around its source before he could make for the neighborhood of the hermit's hut in the eastern desert. Very well: Circe must know that *they* knew that the creature had been wounded, and must know that the tracks of his flight would be plainly visible in the daylight. What action would she expect them to take?

“Overconfidence is her weakness,” said the King, wagging his head sagely. “Look how she played with us. Look at the risks she took with her references to Ulysses

and to the plant Moly. Why, she as good as told us into what creatures she intended to change us. Anyone who remembered his Homer properly would have discovered her at once. Now, she has made up her mind that you, St. George, are no more than an ignorant English sportsman seeking strange beasts to kill, and that I am but a stout old dodderer who was saved by a flicker of his boyhood's memories. So the question is: What would such an English sportsman controlling such an old dodderer do in the present circumstances, *if neither of them knew anything of the witches' cavern*? There can be no doubt about the answer. They would be off hotfoot in the morning, following the tracks of the wounded quarry ere the rain had washed these away. That, then, is what we must do. But we must pretend to lose those tracks early; and when we have done so we must continue our search in the *wrong direction*—up the mountain slopes. Thus, she will be assured that we have no reason to suppose that the monster has passed round the source of the brook and has gone toward the desert, and she will argue from this that we have no knowledge of the witches' cavern by the hermit's hut."

"We should have hounds and half a dozen huntsmen," commented St. George.

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"No," replied the King. "She knows—our journey from the bridge will have taught her—that we prefer to conduct such highly dangerous expeditions with as little assistance as possible." He filled his beaker with the Queen's excellent wine and drank deeply.

Cleodolinda pushed away her plate. Her breakfast appetite

seemed to have departed. She told herself sharply that this was nonsense, and that she must learn to trust her menfolk to look after themselves.

“It will be, then, a short expedition, and for show only?” she asked St. George. The Knight nodded.

“But why,” continued the Princess, “are you both so certain that Circe will be watching us?”

“We are not certain,” replied St. George. “Indeed, she cannot spend whole days in spying upon us. But it would be an elementary precaution on her part to see whether we do or do not trace the giant footmarks to the witches’ cavern.”

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“Oh! Do be careful,” pleaded Queen Sophia. The King nodded, and patted his sister on the shoulder. He understood this sort of thing in women. Cleodolinda’s self-restraint perplexed him. He sighed. Who could expect to understand this new generation?

“We should be away in ten minutes,” he remarked. “Sir Rudolph, will you find us weapons?”

Eight minutes later the King and St. George left quite openly by the northern drawbridge. Each was dressed in hunting garb. Equipment was confined to a strung bow, a short steel sword, a quiverful of silver-headed arrows, a pouch and a hunting horn.

They made their way to the last of the receding footprints visible outside the forest. Standing by this, the next print was

plain to see; for the undergrowth was a thick tangle of briars, and this was crushed down in one place. Parting the flattened mass, they found the pine needles underneath driven deep into the clay. The impressions of the monster's toes were plain; and, when they noted which way these pointed and walked on in that direction, they came after about twenty paces to another and similar imprint. Following up in this way, they made easy progress for half a mile; then a change occurred.

The next print was not where they had expected to find it, but four yards to the left. It was, moreover, much shallower than it should have been. St. George whistled and, dropping on his hands and knees, peered closely at the flattened soil. Then he pointed, and the King, bending over him, saw the clear marks of several naked feet of normal size. The big footmark was, evidently, nothing more than a crude imitation—an imitation stamped out by ordinary feet. The briars had been beaten down into it: their strands showed numerous marks of bruises where they had been struck with a stick. Both men glanced to the right, and there, four yards away, they saw a tangle of undergrowth which, obviously, had been yanked up from a previous crushed-down state. The entire deception had been executed in such childish fashion that the two men looked at each other and laughed aloud.

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“I do not suppose there are any huntsmen among that crew,” said the King, “and Circe, if I remember aright, is no Diana. But we must pretend to be taken in.”

So they followed solemnly the false trail. This, as they advanced, grew more and more careless in its construction, for witches and suchlike inferior creatures are

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not capable of steady work. But the interesting thing was that the trail curved steadily to the left, away from the source of the stream, so that presently it was leading straight upward toward the cone of the volcano.

“We had best hurry on,” said the King, “and show ourselves on the bare slopes above the pine trees, so that Circe may feel assured that we have been misled. It may rain at any moment, and that might render us invisible.”

The forest was thinner now and the undergrowth less dense. This more than compensated for the increasing steepness of the slope, and they made good progress. Suddenly, to St. George’s surprise, the trees ended; and they found themselves on the outskirts of what was evidently a ruined village.

“I had forgotten this,” said the King. “It was occupied not many years ago. The people grazed goats along the mountainsides. Unfortunately, the last big eruption wiped out three-quarters of the village, and the inhabitants deserted what was left. If we go up this street you will see a strange sight.”

The “street” was a twisting alley of roofless huts; and, on rounding a corner, St. George saw that the farther end was blocked by a high bank of gray-white stone. This rose well above the roofless walls, and St. George, glancing from right to left, saw that it ran right across the village.

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“The end of the lava stream,” said the King’s voice in his ear.

“Really!” cried St. George. “Why, I had always supposed that a lava stream would descend like a torrent of liquid, spreading out as a liquid spreads.”

“So it does at the beginning of an eruption,” replied the King. “But it cools rapidly at its forward end; and, in the course of a day or two, that end banks up in the fashion you see. It is pushed steadily forward, however, by the immense weight of the molten stream behind it. Most of the damage in a prolonged eruption is caused by that irresistible wall moving steadily forward. But let us climb it and you shall see.”

The great bank of pumice stone was quite easy to ascend. St. George, standing on its summit, saw that it stretched sideways for nearly a quarter of a mile. It was this that had cut the great swath in the forest which they had seen from the palace battlements. Level with the top of the bank the lava stretched backward, at first like a solidified lake, then like a solidified river, and farther up the mountain, like a solidified cascade. Something of the tremendous power of that mass could be realized from the fact that the bank, at one of its outer edges, had shorn away half of a massive stone watchtower, leaving the untouched portion sticking up like a pinnacle.

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“Why did it stop here?” asked the Knight.

“Simply because the eruption stopped,” replied the King. “No volcano erupts continuously. But let us get on. There is a cloud over the cone, and we shall have rain very quickly.”

The pumice was not difficult to walk upon, and they ascended rapidly. For the benefit of any possible hostile watcher they made pretense of examining every crevice that they passed. St. George fell awondering whether Cleodolinda could see them. The palace was clearly visible, and something which

might have been a white kerchief was waving from a turret window. He waved his cap in reply, and thereafter he felt less awed by the immensity of the forces of nature around him.

It was shortly after this that they became enveloped in a misty rain which blotted out everything beyond the range of a dozen yards. St. George was for halting and returning, but the King urged that, since they had come so far, they might as well push on to the cleft in the cone. "From there we shall obtain," said he, "when this cloud blows by, a magnificent bird's-eye view of the entire country—even up to the hermit's hut in the desert." St. George agreed that this might well prove useful. 137

It was bright sunshine when they reached the cleft; but, alas! that meant merely that they had climbed above the cloud, and that this, now, was flowing solemnly by beneath them, with no sign of coming to an end. Seeing that the sun was well past the zenith, they sat down and ate the provisions which they had brought with them. Thereafter, out of curiosity, they passed through the cleft and gazed upon the interior of the crater.

At first, they, saw little of interest. The crater was like the inside of a great cup with a flat bottom of solidified lava. This floor was a considerable distance below them; and the King explained that, when an eruption ceased, the lava level in the crater fell owing to contraction while cooling. But he looked puzzled. "This floor is very far down," he said. "I should not have thought that it would have sunk quite so low."

He pointed out to St. George the inner crater, with its

own little cone. "That forms," he explained, "as the lava solidifies round the edge of the main crater." Then, as they withdrew their attention from this object, both, simultaneously, saw a most unexpected thing. In the eastern side of the main cone there was another cleft.

This second fissure extended to a depth much greater than that of the cleft in which they stood. Its bottom, indeed, was quite close to the lava floor.

"Ha!" cried the King. "That is why the lava level is so far beneath us. Another and a later torrent must have poured out there. Let us see whither it flowed."

"It grows late, sire," observed St. George. But the King's curiosity would brook no denial. The descent to the crater floor looked none too easy, so they made their way back to the outside of the cone and proceeded to skirt its sides. Since the new cleft was in the eastern side of the volcano—just out of view from the palace—they had to circle round about a quarter of the cone's circumference. This task took them the better part of an hour. Meanwhile, the cloud drifted steadily by beneath them.

The newer lava torrent ran straight down the sides of the mountain into the obscurity of the cloud, and the King descended that way without hesitation. "It will be easier," he pointed out, "to make our way home by the lower slopes." The eruption in this case seemed, however, to have been of short duration, and the lava stream came soon to an end. They were nearing the bottom of the cloud now, and the wet mist was less thick. They could see the edge of the pine

forest below them, so they continued straight downhill.

Suddenly their progress was arrested. They found themselves on the brink of a narrow chasm—a veritable rent in the solid rock. It came from the left, and its trend was slantingly downhill to their right. It was about fifty feet deep, and its sides were sheer. Those sides glowed with a dull bronze sheen in the misty light; so that, at first, the explorers thought they had come upon some vein of metal ore, split asunder. But, looking more closely, they saw that the sheen was due to an iridescent fungus which clung closely to the walls. The cleft was too wide to be jumped, so they followed it downward and to the right until it entered the pine wood. Then they left it and struck off to the south along the upper edge of that wood, aiming for the ruined village.

When about halfway between the two lava streams, they came upon a second rift. This ran straight downhill. It was shallower than the other, while its sides were sloping and carried no fungoid growth. There was no doubt that this was a rent formed by an earth tremor, for some of the pine trees at its edges had fallen inward and lay sprawling down its sides with their roots in the air. The travelers crossed this obstacle without difficulty and continued on their way—only to be arrested, five minutes later, by a third rift exactly similar to the last. Six more of these rifts—all bare of vegetation and all with sloping sides littered with fallen pines—did they encounter in the course of the next mile. Thus it came to pass that, when they drew near to the deserted village, the sun already had set.

They were hurrying their fastest now; and they found, after a

little while, that they were overtaking a stout peasant woman who was hastening along with a bundle of sticks under her arm. She was apparently making for a farmhouse a couple of hundred yards to the near side of the village. They slowed their pace to suit hers and at the same time unslung their bows and fitted arrows to the strings; for they were thoroughly distrustful of anything that might be moving in this neighborhood at nightfall. As they neared the farm they saw that this building had its roof intact and that it possessed shuttered windows and a closed door. The peasant woman made straight for that door; but, just before she reached it, there rose, from a boulder close to her path, a most strange-looking creature. It was an incredibly thin old crone, seemingly so weak that she could scarcely stand upright. They saw her extend a clawlike hand; and they heard her quavering voice crying, “*I am so hungry.*” The effect of this upon the hurrying peasant woman was most extraordinary. She screamed loudly, hurled her bundle of wood into the suppliant’s face, knocking the wretch headlong, and darted into the house. As she turned to close the door, she caught sight of the two travelers, and paused to shout something indistinguishable. Then she slammed the door, and they heard a heavy bar fall into place.

The King and St. George hastened forward to assist the beggarwoman to rise; but she was on her feet again by the time that they reached her. Seldom had they seen so pitiable a case of pure starvation: the crone’s face was almost like a skull. She extended a skeletonlike hand. “A morsel of bread,” she yammered. “*I am so hungry. Oh! I am so hungry.*” She continued to repeat this phrase. It sounded like a bleating sheep.

An upper shutter was flung open in the farmhouse, and the peasant woman poked out her head. “Don’t touch her!” she screamed. “She is Hungry Hannah! She is a witch! A witch! Look at her feet!”

Hungry Hannah (if that indeed was her name) did a back somersault—there is no other word for it. She disappeared behind the boulder upon which she had been seated. St. George, running round, saw no sign of her. There was only a long, thin, brown snake gliding swiftly away through the undergrowth. He loosed an arrow at this; but the mark was not easy, and he missed. A moment later the snake was lost to view.

The farmhouse door opened, and the peasant woman stood there panting. “Come in!” she cried. “For Heaven’s sake, don’t waste time goggling. Come inside! No man’s life is safe in these woods after sunset.”

Moved partly by curiosity and partly by the urgency of the appeal, the King and St. George accepted the woman’s invitation. She bolted the door behind them and led the way into a long, low kitchen. Here a wood fire smoldered on the hearth, and from an iron pot suspended close above the red-hot ash there came a most appetizing odor. The room contained little else beyond a long deal table and half a dozen wooden stools. On the table stood a tallow candle, and this the woman lit by the simple method of thrusting its end into the fire.



stools to the fire and seated themselves. “Then I must ask you to forgive my rough tongue. I was sadly flustered. That woman, that Hannah, she’s the most dangerous of them all. If you had given her alms she’d have had you in her power. That’s what happened, they say, to Queen Sophy’s own magician.”

“I have heard something of the kind,” replied the King. “But tell me, why did you call to us to look at the hag’s feet?”

“They are put on pointing backward,” said the woman shortly. “But what do you two here on the mountainside with your bows and all? There is no game in these woods.”

“We hunt an evil monster,” replied the King. “Our bows shoot arrows tipped with silver.”

“Silver-pointed arrows!” cried the woman admiringly.

“Well, that’s a fine idea.” She let some tallow drip on to the table, stuck the candle into it, and seated herself on a stool. “But you will not be hunting in the dark, and you had best bide here for the night.”

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“We are grateful to you for your offer,” replied the King, “but we must get back to the palace as quickly as we may.”

“You know your own business best,” said the woman. “I would offer you wine before you go, had I any in the house. But maybe you’ll find a bowl of broth more warming? It has been simmering all day.”

“Why, yes,” said the King, smiling. “That we will take gladly. But how come you to be living in this house alone?”

“It was my husband’s farm,” replied the woman. “He is dead now; but no witch shall drive me from it.”

“Then were you here when the lava came down?” asked St. George.

“No,” said the woman. “That was before I married. My husband told me it was a wild sight.”

“It was, indeed,” affirmed the King. “I saw it. For six days the mountain erupted. Then it quieted down; but we in the palace (I was staying there) lived in terror of a new outbreak. You see, yonder lava bank had plowed a channel nearly to the bottom of the mountain, and the congealing lava had filled that channel nearly to the brim with a smooth surface. We feared that a second eruption of equal violence would bring a molten stream pouring down that smooth slide at terrific speed. It might, easily, have swept up to the palace, and beyond.”

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The woman’s eyes glowed. “Ah, by Zeus!” she cried softly, “that would be a fine sight to see.” She rose. “I will fetch clean bowls for your broth,” she said, and left the room.

St. George leaned quickly toward the King. “Did you see her hand when she raised the candle?” he whispered.

“No,” replied the King in the same tone, “but I know that no peasant women here would swear by the Greek god Zeus.” He hesitated a moment. “Do not kill her,” he said urgently. “I will tell you why, later. But scare her. Scare her very thoroughly.”

“Knock over the candle, then, in the melee,” replied St.

George; and then, at the sound of returning footsteps, they both leaned back into their former positions.

The woman placed two earthenware bowls upon the table, and ladled broth into these from the big pot. The King sighed as the full odor reached his nostrils. The meals this creature prepared were certainly fit for any king. “There,” said the woman, smiling. “That’s the best I can do for you, I fear. Drink it while it’s hot.”

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The King rose, yawning. “No, thank you, my dear,” he said. “Give it to Hungry Hannah—in return for her services tonight.”

The woman’s eyes flickered, and the knuckles of her five fingers gripping the ladle showed white. “I—I do not understand you,” she gasped. St. George sprang erect and fitted an arrow to his bow.

“By Zeus!” mimicked the King. “I take no food or drink from *your* hands—princess.”

Circe dropped the ladle and sprang toward the door. “Stand away from that!” thundered St. George, his arrow pointed at her breast. She shrank back against the wall. “Hear me!” she gasped.

The King took two strides forward, bringing him beside the candle. “The game is over,” he cried, “and you have lost.” He turned his head toward St. George. “Do not parley!” he roared. “Shoot her!” His hand, flung out toward the enemy, knocked over the candle. He grabbed clumsily at this as it rolled, and extinguished the flame—just as St. George’s arrow

thudded into the wall six inches above Circe's head.

For a moment the room seemed dark; for the glowing
ashes gave but little light. "Guard the window, sire!"
cried the Knight. He sprang toward Circe, tripped
intentionally over a stool, and fell full length on the floor. A
moment later the door of the room opened and shut. They
heard feet racing toward the main door, and the fall of the
heavy bar. Then Circe's voice came to them from outside.

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"English fool!" she cried. It is impossible to describe the
venom which she put into those words.

They ran out after her and made a show of searching, but she
had gone.

The King turned to St. George. "Do you understand why I
spared her?" he asked.

The Knight smiled. "There is no need to explain, sire," he
said. "A foolish leader in supreme command is worth his
weight in gold to the adversary. Circe, who controls the
cavern horde, may be worth her weight in diamonds to us."

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Chapter IX

RASH MAGIC

It will be remembered that both the main river and the moat stream had their sources in the lower slopes of the pine wood, and that the ruined village lay between the two. The travelers decided quickly that it would be unduly dangerous to return by the way they had traversed when they left the palace in the morning. Circe would be fairly certain to have set ambushes along that route. They started off in that direction, talking loudly; then, using the woodcraft in which both were expert, doubled back silently to the upper level of the trees, coming out on the other side of the ruined village. Thence they trotted westward, keeping just within the trees where the undergrowth was sparse; and they continued on that level until they had passed the source of the main river. They made their way downward along the western bank of this river, thus putting running water between themselves and any hordes that Circe might have called out to intercept them in the wood. Continuing this way brought them finally to the western side of the ravine at the foot of the palace. Here, after a pause to make sure that Phelan was not in the neighborhood, they plunged into the river and swam across, emerging at the foot of the precipice halfway between the two waterfalls. They entered the palace by the secret sally port.

They had some difficulty in making their peace with Queen Sophia and Cleodolinda; for the two women, naturally, had been wild with anxiety at the incomprehensible delay in the return of the explorers. These had been expected back early in the afternoon. However, the King took all the blame—which was quite proper, since the cause of the whole trouble had been his sudden determination to explore the cone.

Sir Thomas had returned with his mission safely accomplished, and the fruits of this already were apparent. Watch fires along the King's side of the frontier could be seen glimmering palely through the mists, and occasionally the tumult of an elephant drive through the woods came faintly to the ears of the sentries on the palace battlements.

The two explorers were weary. When they had dried and changed, eaten and drunk, pacified their womenfolk and related the day's adventures, they sought their beds. Just before they parted, St. George drew the King aside.

"Tell me, sire," he asked, "when did you first realize that the peasant woman was Circe?"

The King looked at him, and his eyes twinkled. "From the very beginning," he replied. "*That farmhouse was not there when we ascended in the morning.*"

"Oh, ho!" said the Knight, and paused to think this over. "Then all that explanation about the volcano was—"

"Just general principles," yawned the King. "One seeks to discover where the adversary is ignorant, and one plays up to

that ignorance. She, evidently, did not appreciate that the latest eruption had flowed through the other cleft. Good night, my dear fellow, sleep well.”

* * * * *

St. George did not sleep well. He had a nightmare. He dreamed that he was pursued by a giant from whom his silver arrows glanced harmlessly. The giant was addressing him as “little man” and threatening to give him a swim in the river. He awoke with a start, to find the misty dawn-light flooding in through his window. From without there came a voice.

“Ochone! ochone; but it’s the bad night I’m havin’,”
said the voice. “Sorra a fish, sorra a single fish. An’ me
with my back achin’ from the way I’ve been throwin’ my line
with never a stop for rest.”

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St. George slipped from his bed and tiptoed to the window. A tall man, a very tall man, was walking slowly beside the palace moat. He was walking eastward, upstream; and at every few paces he paused, waved a long fishing rod and shot a line across into the water where this ran at its quietest close to the palace wall.

“Nothing there! Nothing at all,” cried the man. He must be nine feet high, thought St. George.

The fisherman glanced up and saw him. “Come you down, little man,” he called, “an’ it’s a fine swim in the river I’ll be givin’ you. The spalpeens—bad cess to them—have been after boarding up the lower windows since the time I hauled the drunken scullion out by the ear of him.” He turned and

strode slowly on, muttering to himself.

St. George watched him out of sight. This was not very far—for the mists were thick—but the man continued to follow the stream beyond the point where this split to form the palace island, and he paused often to search the water with his fly. He will not get to the cavern until long after dawn, if he travels at that rate, thought the Knight as he slipped back into his bed.

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* * * * *

By breakfasttime the rain was falling again—falling in a steady drizzle which looked like continuing all day. The King was delighted.

“This is a chance—indeed, a rare chance—” he pointed out, “for us to visit the hermit’s hut and to seek for the cavern. The rain will conceal our movements, and it will, moreover, wash away all traces of our passage. Let us start as soon as may be.”

The old nurse at the King’s castle had made up a hasty bundle of such things as she considered to be absolutely necessary for a princess on an emergency visit to an aunt, and had insisted with much shrill language that Sir Thomas’s escort of archers should provide transport. Thus it came to pass that it was a neatly clad and well-shod Cleodolinda who joined the others at the breakfast table.

They left the palace ten minutes later. The men were armed as before. The Princess was similarly equipped, save that her bow was shorter and that she carried a dagger in place of a

sword.

They traveled eastward along the banks of the tributary river; for the hermit had written of a stream which ran a mile to the west of his hut and which, according to Sir Thomas, was this very river just where it turned west after its southward journey from the pine woods at the base of the volcano. Sir Thomas led the way, and it was he who showed them where they must leave the river and strike across the desert. 153

There was no true rain there, although it was pouring torrents behind them; but a westerly wind blew mists like wreaths of smoke over the arid wastes, and these mists concealed the travelers from observation. The same wind set the sand swirling about their feet, and they noted thankfully that they were leaving no traces. Thomas had taken a high and distant peak as a marching mark; but, since this was visible only when some eddy in the wind rent the upper surface of the mist, parting this into tossing spirals, there was always a danger that they might be making unrealized leeway to one side or the other.

They marched on, up and down, up and down over the stony ridges and the sandy hollows; but a hut is a small thing to find in a mist, and presently Sir Thomas halted and declared that they must be off the proper line.

After discussion, they decided to work toward the north. This plan was successful, for a little later they came upon a great ridge which Sir Thomas recognized. It rose twice as high as did any other that they had encountered, and Sir 154

Thomas whispered that this was the place where the hermit had smitten the great rock and opened the passage to the cavern. "I know it well," he said. "Often, as a boy, have I gazed upon that stone and wondered what might be the invisible seal which the hermit traced thereon. It lies on this side."

All fitted arrows to their bows, and Sir Thomas led the way along the base of the ridge. There was no mistaking the great rock; for there was none other of its size in the neighborhood. There was no mistaking, either, the fact that it had not moved!

"Well," cried the King, "may I be—" but Cleodolinda clapped her hand over her father's mouth.

"This is no place for oaths," said she severely, "nor is there any need for such. The cavern must have extended for many miles underground, according to the hermit's own description; and the earthquakes must have broken a way into it elsewhere—that is all."

"Yonder is the hut," interrupted St. George, pointing. A trick of the mist had cleared momentarily the region below them; and they saw, some three hundred yards to the west, a low erection of stone. Thither they ran swiftly.

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The hut was a narrow oblong with four walls composed of upright slabs. A gap toward the end of one of the longer sides served for an entrance: there was no door. The roof consisted of similar slabs laid flat. These rested upon small stones six inches high placed at intervals upon the walls. The result of this was that a long slit, serving for ventilation and for light,

ran round the hut just beneath the roof. The floor was loose dry sand.

“It will serve us for a shelter if need be,” said the King gloomily.

“The mist is thinning,” observed St. George. They glanced round and saw that the top of the big ridge was clearly visible.

“Let us take that as a return mark,” suggested Cleodolinda, “and explore the country farther to the east. It was from east of this that the watchers came flying. We all know that.”

They climbed the big ridge, and saw to the east a flowing sea of mist in the surface of which the tops of hundreds of lower ridges appeared and disappeared like submerged rocks just awash. The task of exploring the maze of little valleys between all those crests offered small attraction; but none could think of any simpler method of procedure. So, realizing that they were extremely conspicuous where they stood, they ceased to debate the matter, and plunged downhill.

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The story of the subsequent search is merely a history of monotonous failure. Within the labyrinth of twisting, circling little hollows they lost very quickly all sense of direction. The big ridge showed up frequently above the mists, but usually in some totally unexpected quarter. Later, when the sun was definitely in the west, they were able to maintain a zigzag course with a general eastward trend; but, in all their wanderings, they came upon no sign of a fissure in the soil. At last, exhausted and dispirited, they abandoned the task and

turned back toward their landmark, now several miles away. The sun was sinking rapidly; and, as they neared the big ridge, a little cold breeze sprang up. The mist tore into tatters, and these flew away like an army of whirling wraiths. The King called a halt.

“We had best hide somewhere for the night,” he said. “We are fairly well hidden in this hollow, for that matter.”

“But we can see nothing from here,” cried the Princess.

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“The six watchers will be flying by very soon, and it would help us greatly if we could note the exact direction from which they came.”

“If we could see them, they could see us,” replied her father, “and then we should have the whole horde—several thousand of them—about our ears.”

“The hut!” suggested St. George. “It is well in the open.”

“I agree,” said the King. “But we shall have to run to get there in time. Come on!”

They ran. Left, down one valley: right, up another: round the end of the big ridge: and a final sprint across flat ground to the hut. They hurried in through the entrance, and, with the exception of Cleodolinda, threw themselves panting on the floor. The Princess—swiftest runner but two in all the King’s dominions—was in no way distressed; and she crossed over to the eastern side of the hut and peered thence through the slit betwixt roof and wall.

The setting sun had tinged the top of the ridge with

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fiery red; but there was no sign of anything moving within the wide range of her vision. One by one the others rose from the floor and joined her; but no flying watcher appeared. Cleodolinda moved over to the northern slit: the King took post to the south: Sir Thomas crossed to the west. The rising wind blew coldly through the entrance.

Suddenly St. George uttered a startled exclamation. The others sprang back to his side.

On the summit of the ridge there stood, bathed in the red light, tall and slender and lovely, her long hair blowing out like a flame, the enchantress Circe. One rounded arm was raised to shield her eyes from the setting sun. She was gazing to the west, toward the palace; but she pivoted slowly as they watched, and searched the countryside in all directions. Then, apparently satisfied, she faced toward the desert, threw back her head, cupped her hands about her mouth, and uttered a long, clear, musical cry.

For two minutes nothing happened. Then there soared over the ridge, coming from a direction slightly to the north of due east, the first of the great crowlike watchers. One by one the remaining five followed. Circe waved each onward as it passed.

A short pause ensued. Circe was waiting, apparently, until the watchers had taken up their positions. Then she wheeled again toward the desert and repeated her call.



As before, there was an interval of two minutes. The last rays of sunset faded from the ridge. Circe stood erect, a

pale, commanding figure against the darkening sky.

Suddenly the air around her was thick with flying forms. None saw whence these had come; but there must have been thousands of them. She raised one arm; the horde screamed, wheeled and formed into a whirling circle in which she stood as center. She lowered the arm, and the circle slowed, sank and came to rest on and around the ridge.

They were all there: every creature of whom the hermit had written. Jinns, afreets, witch doctors, medicine men, sorcerers, magi, necromancers, warlocks, wizards, ordinary witches: they stood in a vast throng awaiting Circe's commands.

The enchantress wheeled suddenly, and pointed fiercely to the volcano. The whole horde imitated her action.

Up went Circe's arms, and her voice rose in a torrent of words which conveyed no meaning to the listeners in the hut. The arms fell again, and she stood with drooping head as if in supplication. The horde below flung skinny hands skyward and broke out into an appalling babel as they repeated the incantation.

Then there began a droning sound, wild and unearthly. It waxed, waned and died away. There was something in this which affected profoundly three of the four listeners in the hut. The King, the Princess and Sir Thomas felt their blood racing in their veins and little shivers running up their backs. Not so St. George; he groaned and thrust his fingers in his ears. "It is the Scots piper," he muttered. "Heard anyone ever so fiendish a noise?"

Up went Circe's arms again, and the whole performance was repeated. The King seized St. George by the shoulder. "That misleading information!" he whispered. "It is going to bear fruit; but what, I cannot tell. Come this way." The two crossed over to the northern slit.

Again the incantation broke forth. Again it was echoed by the horde; and again the pipes droned menacing insistence. Then Circe took a step forward and threw out her arms sideways.

"Vulcan! Vulcan! Vulcan!" she called. "Give signal that you hear!" She stood with arms outflung and head thrown back. The horde stayed silent, but the pipes began to moan.

"Vulcan?—Volcano?" whispered Cleodolinda to Sir Thomas.

"The god of the underground forges," came the quick reply. "All volcanoes belong to him. Come, let us see if he answers." The pair darted across the hut and joined the King and St. George.

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The summit of the mountain was touched still by the last rays of the vanished sun. Outside the hut the droning swelled until Cleodolinda felt almost as if her body were rising from the ground.

Then, from the top of the rosy cone there floated upward one—two—three tiny puffs of a deeper red.

The pipes broke into a wild skirling. Shrieks and yells of joy came from the horde. Above the din rose Circe's voice: "Away! away! my people! To our night's amusement!" A whistling, whizzing noise filled the air above and around the

hut. The occupants dropped to the floor and crouched against the walls.

Presently all sounds died away, and there followed a stillness which seemed, somehow, clean. The four rose to their feet and peered forth. The landscape was empty of life.

“Cold and wet though we be, we must sleep here tonight,” said the King. “I shall take first watch. Sir Thomas, you shall follow. The third shall be yours, St. George. Wake us, please, at the first streak of dawn.”

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“But I shall take my share,” cried Cleodolinda indignantly.

“You will do nothing of the kind,” snapped the King.

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Chapter X

THE CROWNING FOLLY

Dawn came clear and cloudless, but with a stiff westerly breeze. St. George, following instructions, aroused the sleeping King.

“Be careful, sire,” he said. “It is time for the creatures to return, and there is plenty of light both outside and inside this hut. Our faces would show white in the slits, and movement within would be visible clearly through the western entrance. We had best pack ourselves against the wall on that side, and wait.”

This advice seemed sound; and, after the other pair had been awakened, three persons put it into execution. Cleodolinda, by agreement, shook her dark hair over her face (so that only her eyes were visible) and watched through the slits in the northwest corner.

Rather surprisingly, the witches did not cross the ridge on their return. They came, as reported by the Princess, from all directions, and the nearest passed by a quarter of a mile to the north. St. George offered what all agreed must be the true explanation.

“Circe comes out first,” he suggested. “She comes to the ridge because that provides a lookout point. She sees that all is safe before she calls out the others. Then *they* fly past her in order to receive any new commands there may be for the night. But in the morning there is no need for such a preliminary survey of the country. They have been scattered over it all night. Hence, each flies straight to the cavern entrance.”

“Well, what shall we do when they have all gone by?” asked the King. “Continue our search, working rather more to the northeast? It was from that quarter that the watchers came last night.”

St. George shook his head. “They flew for two minutes before they arrived,” he declared. “Say, from a point a mile and a half away. It would be difficult to find that point among all those little twisting valleys. No, I have a simpler plan. Let us follow Phelan.”

“*Phelan?*” said the King.

“Yes,” replied St. George, with rising enthusiasm. “He gets home much later than the others; for he *walks*, fishing the stream as he goes. I watched him, remember. He never looks back. If he has a load of salmon, he must needs walk also across the bit from the stream to the cavern. We can continue to follow him then; keeping always one turn of the valley behind him.”

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“There go the six watchers!” interrupted the Princess.

The King’s eyes gleamed. “You are right,” he cried. “We may wait another ten minutes, to give Circe time to get home.

After that let us make straight for the stream. It is only a mile away.”

There was no sign of Circe within the allotted period; so, assuming that she had flown home from some other direction, they left the hut and hurried toward the little river. Reaching this, they proceeded a little way along the bank toward the palace, until they came to a convenient hiding place which they had passed on the previous day. Here the stream meandered through a small pine wood which ran back a hundred yards on each side. They entered this wood; then they halted abruptly.

On a flat rock by the water’s edge lay a small blue garment. Part of this overhung the water. At its nearer edge two bare shins stuck up into the air, topped by two little wriggling bare feet. At the overhanging end a cluster of black curls was just visible. The owner of the cluster was attempting, apparently, to achieve apoplexy; for the crown of its head was directed toward the water. Suddenly the child wriggled back, holding aloft a bare, wet arm. From her hand there dangled a small fish. “Six!” she cried, and tossed the fluttering bit of silver back into the stream.

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Sir Thomas trod on a twig; at the sound of the snap, the child rolled over and sat up, pushing the mop of tangled black curls from her eyes with a wet hand. The eyes were blue—real blue. Cleodolinda caught her breath. She wished she were an artist—to paint that picture. The child, some six years old, was lovely.

“I’m fishing,” said the little creature solemnly. “I’ve caught

six.”

“But you throw them back again,” said St. George.

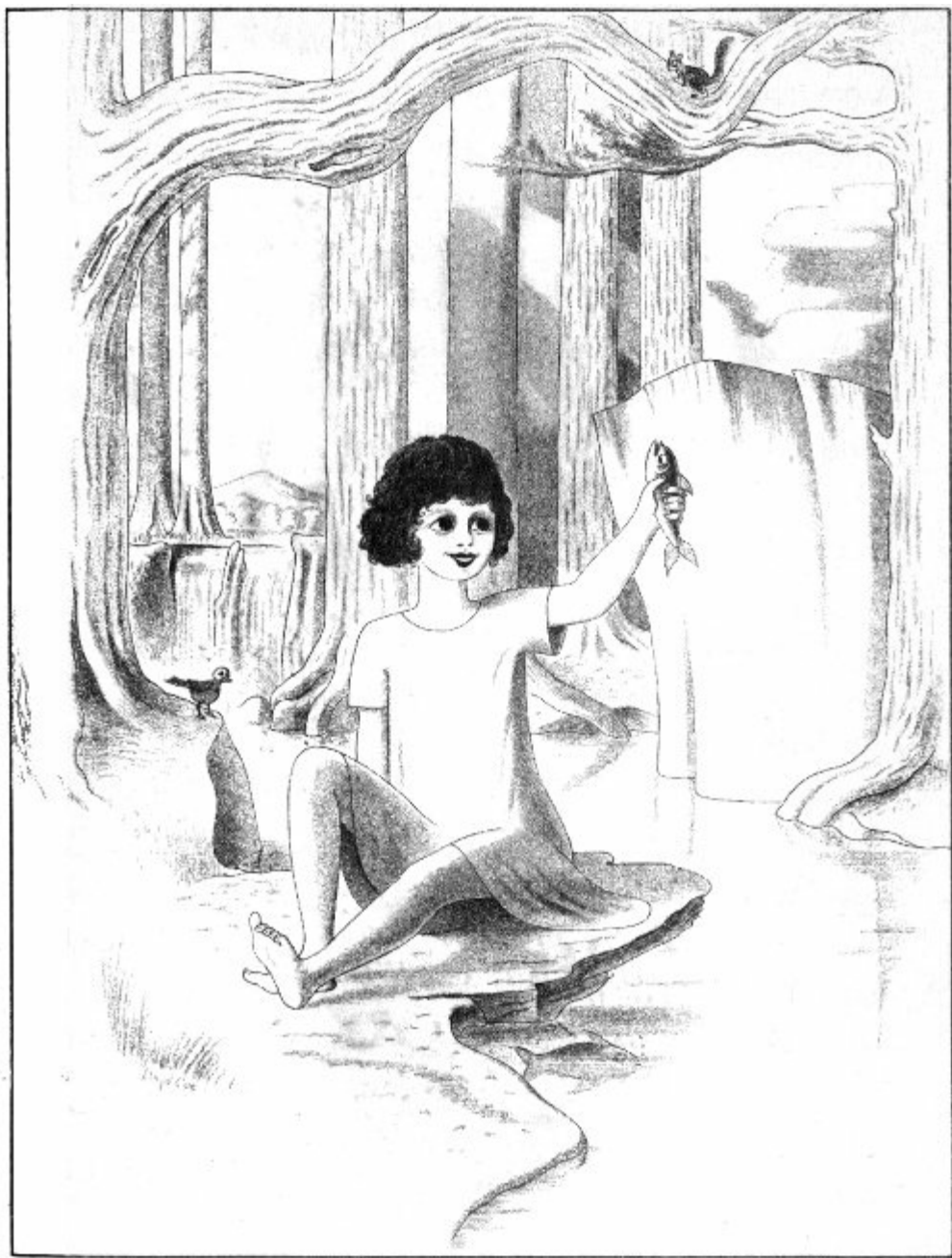
“Why shouldn’t I?” said the child; and there was no answer to that.

“What is your name, little maid?” asked the King.

The child laughed—a little rippling gurgle of merriment.

“Phelan calls me Rosaleen, and that is the name I like best. You may call me that. But my real name is”—she drew a long breath—“Mary-Sophia-Cleodolinda-Anastasia-Theresa.”

“Cleodolinda?” said the Princess.



“After the Princess of Silene,” explained the child. “She is very beautiful, you know. I think,” she added candidly, “she

must be nearly as beautiful as you.”

“And Sophia?” asked St. George.

“After the Queen of this country,” replied the child.

“But what is your father’s name? Or your mother’s?” asked the Princess.

Rosaleen looked puzzled. “I don’t remember,” she said. “I don’t think I had a father or a mother.”

The King intervened. “You know Phelan?” he asked with a slight frown.

“Why, of course,” cried the child. “Everybody knows Phelan. He is a fisherman, and he comes this way every morning. I’m waiting for him now.” She looked suddenly anxious.

“Perhaps,” she said diffidently, “you’d better get back behind those trees. He is a sorcerer, you know, and he doesn’t like strangers. He doesn’t mind me because”—she tossed her curls proudly—“I am a fisherwoman.”

“Rosaleen! Dark Rosaleen! Where are you hidin’ the morn?” came a man’s voice from a little way downstream.

“Here, Phelan. I’m fishing,” called the child.

The King and Sir Thomas darted back among the trees. Cleodolinda made a step forward and held out her arms.

“Come with me,” she said urgently. St. George laid his hand on her shoulder. “Leave her,” he said. “She is evidently speaking the truth.” The Princess hesitated, biting her lip; and

then she allowed St. George to hurry her up the slope.

Phelan came into view. Four huge salmon were slung on his back; but, big as they were, he carried them as if they weighed no more than minnows. He halted beside the child, grounding the butt of his great rod on the rock.

“The top of the mornin’ to you, acushla,” he said. “An’ how many fish have you caught?”

“Six!” cried the child, clapping her hands. “Six; and such big ones, Phelan.”

“Six!” cried Phelan in pretended amazement. “Why, that’s more than I’m after catching meself. I have but four.”

“Oh, Phelan!” cried the child in ecstasy. “Have I really caught more than you? I don’t often do that.”

Phelan looked at her in silence for a while. Then he spoke, and his voice was urgent.

“Look you now, Rosaleen darlin’,” he said. “Do you be after catching one of those little fish of yours, and do you put it on the hook of my fly. Then, if you’ll take my big rod in your hands (I’ll help you to hold it) and say after me the words I’ll be tellin’ you—why, then you’ll catch a fish that’ll be as big as any of mine.”

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But Rosaleen put her hands behind her back and looked up at him frowning. “No, Phelan,” she said, shaking her head, “you know I don’t like your way of fishing, and you know I don’t like you to talk like that. But I wish you good luck, all the

same,” she added. She rose and held up her face to be kissed.

Phelan stooped and pecked her awkwardly. “Ah, well!” he sighed, as he straightened himself. “Maybe, when you’ve a few more years to you, and have found that the world, bad cess to it, isn’t all butterflies an’ silver bells—maybe then you’ll come to me, and I’ll be showin’ you how to get a bit of your own back. But there’s one thing, darlin’, you’ll never need to be after fishin’ for, an’ so I’m tellin’ you. An’ that’s the men.” He roared with laughter, and strode away up the river.

The four came from behind the pine trees and hurried down to the child. She was gazing wistfully after Phelan, and looked distressingly near tears.

“We have to go now,” said the King, “but—Good-by, Rosaleen!” He stooped and kissed her.

Cleodolinda knelt and held out her arms. “Good-by, my little goddaughter,” she said. “Go to the palace and ask for the Princess Cleodolinda. I promise you that you shall see her.”

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St. George tossed the child aloft and caught her again. “And you shall see the Princess’ husband too,” he laughed. “He is an Englishman, and very strong—like me.” He kissed her and set her down.

But the child did not smile. She stood looking at them in a dazed fashion.

“I don’t know who you are,” she said, “but I am—yes, I *am*—

Rosaleen. Dark Rosaleen.” She swayed slightly as she spoke.

It seemed to the others that Cleodolinda must have gone mad. “Wait! Wait!” she cried frantically. Still kneeling, she caught the child fiercely in her arms. “Quick! now! Promise me, *promise* me that you will come to me at the palace.”

“I promise,” said Rosaleen solemnly. She put up her hands shyly and stroked the Princess’ face. Cleodolinda caught them in hers and kissed the two little thumbs. “They are both there still,” she whispered. “But do not wait any more. Go, dear—if you must.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” cried Rosaleen suddenly. She gave a long shudder, and turned deathly white. “Phelan! Help me!” she wailed. Cleodolinda sank back on her heels and hid her face in her hands.

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Abruptly the color flooded back into the child’s cheeks. “Dear me!” she said in a queer voice. “I’ve been forgetting my hospitality.” She darted to where a little bundle lay beside a stone, picked this up and opened it. “Dates,” she said, “really very good dates. Please each take one.” She smiled with an archness that jarred. “Mother will be angry with me if you don’t,” she simpered.

She selected a date carefully and held it out to the King.

“Don’t touch them!” said Cleodolinda in a smothered voice. Her face was still covered.

Her three companions looked at the hand which held the date. It had five fingers and no thumb.

St. George caught the child by the shoulder. She glanced at his stern countenance, and her eyes flickered.

“Do you know?” said she, speaking very rapidly. “I saw Circe last night. She was getting some witches to make a spell for her: such a funny spell. I’d better tell you what it was. If Circe is killed, the volcano will break into eruption again. It will pour out a stream of lava ten times hotter than before, and enough of it to fill an entire country. Think of that lava racing down that smooth slide toward the palace. Why, poor Queen Sophy and her people would all get burnt up! Circe was so grateful to King Rupert for giving her the idea.” She wrenched herself from St. George’s grasp, threw out her arms and began to dance lightly before them. “Would you like to shoot me, godmother? You are not so pretty as I am; for I have blue eyes with my black hair, and yours are dark. Oh, Rupert, *don’t* look at me like that. Are you sorry that Rosaleen isn’t true? Would you like to shoot me, St. George? Would *anyone* like to shoot me? I will stand quite still”—she did so for a moment—“but remember the volcano. You can see smoke curling up from it now—just at a threat to poor Circe. *Nobody* wants to shoot? Then perhaps I’d better go.” She turned; then paused and looked back over her shoulder. “*Didn’t* Phelan act well? I had only a moment to coach him, just from the instant that I saw you coming from that hut, and guessed that you had spent the night there. I’ll tell him you thought him wonderful. He’ll be so pleased.”

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She danced away, humming to herself. Presently she put her hands together like someone about to dive, and leaned forward on her toes. She left the ground and began to skim through the air, leaning more forward as she did so. She

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flew away over the desert, and in three minutes was lost to view.

“But—but—” cried the King. “She held that little fish up by its tail, pinched between her finger and *thumb*. I saw that plainly.”

Cleodolinda let her hands fall. “There were *two* of them,” she said sadly. “Circe’s magic went wrong somewhere, and the first child was something which she did not want. So she got rid of it and took its place.”

“But how did you know?” asked the King, “for, judging by your behavior, know you did.”

“I cannot tell,” said Cleodolinda rather wildly. “It just came to me.” She hesitated, then her head drooped again into her lifted hands. “But it seemed to me,” she sobbed, “that I had *always* known that child.”

Chapter XI

THE REBELLION OF PHELAN

“We are forgetting Phelan,” said the King abruptly. He was feeling a bit worried himself; but he was terrified of emotion.

St. George lifted the Princess to her feet, and removed her hands from her face. “I have a feeling,” he said urgently, “that we shall never see that first child again unless we finish this war.”

“Oh!” cried Cleodolinda. The “fey” look flickered again in her eyes. “I believe you are right.”

“Then come on!” said the King. “He has got a long start.”

They ran on swiftly along the riverbank—almost too swiftly, for on rounding a bend three minutes later they saw Phelan not more than sixty or seventy yards ahead. Fortunately the fisherman’s attention was elsewhere. He was peering round the trunk of a tree at something that was moving on the opposite bank. The four dropped down into the undergrowth, and watched the man from there.

Cautiously Phelan extended his rod before him. He began to wave it horizontally, paying out line. He

glanced once only to his right to see what space there was amongst the foliage behind. It was marvelous to see the way in which the lengthening line snaked backward and forward without touching a single leaf. Then Phelan cast across the stream, and struck.

They saw now that his quarry was a water rat, and that he had hooked it by the ear. He pulled the little animal into the stream; and, as it touched the water, he shouted his magical formula. "Och! there's a fine salmon!" he cried.

But there was no fine salmon. There was only a rat swimming in the stream.

A look of blank amazement appeared upon the man's features. He gave his rod a jerk; but no salmon appeared. He passed his hand over his eyes, and looked again. Then he dropped the rod.

"Thunder an' lightning!" he muttered. "The Powers of Darkness have broken their contract."

He picked up the rod again, pulled in and released the rat, hoisted his four salmon to his shoulder, and strode on along the bank, talking to himself.

"Why? Why?" they heard him say. "What reason for it did I give them?" He made no further attempt to fish, and his long stride carried him over the ground at a pace which compelled his followers to trot in order to keep up with him.

The stream had bent definitely to the northward and was

leading them up a valley betwixt the volcano and a range of low hills to the east. The water was narrowing rapidly.

“Wherever is he going?” grumbled the King. “We shall be at the source in another ten minutes if we keep on at this rate.”

The desert became reduced to a mere spit of wasteland running up the valley. Its nearest ridge was barely a hundred yards away. But the fisherman kept on his course.

“I do not understand this,” said the King. “Is it possible that the cavern is in that range of hills? They are nearly five miles from the hermit’s hut.”

“But the watchers did not fly from that quarter,” objected Cleodolinda. “Perhaps he is not going to the cavern at all.”

The words were scarcely out of her mouth, when Phelan turned from the stream, struck eastward, and disappeared behind a hillock.

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The four raced after him. There was no sign of the fisherman behind the little eminence; but, fifty yards on, a glen ran eastward between two ridges, and hurrying to the mouth of this they saw him striding along toward the far end. There the glen was crossed by a comparatively wide valley running north and south. But between Phelan and that point lay an area of scattered boulders; and among these he vanished, and did not reappear.

The pursuers looked at one another, and then darted forward. Peering over the boulders they saw that the valley which trended north and south was split open by a narrow fissure

extending along its length as far as the eye could see. At their feet was the shallow beginning of another rift in the soil—a rift which ran forward to meet the long cross fissure. The bottom of this rift sloped steeply downward to an immense depth; and along that bottom Phelan was descending upon what seemed to be a well-beaten path. Presently he was lost to sight in the gloom.

“Give him another four minutes,” whispered St. George, holding out a restraining hand. “He may glance back when he turns to right or left at the bottom.” They waited, the other three watching the outstretched hand impatiently. Presently it fell, and all four ran tiptoe down the narrow path.

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There was no doubt now about that path being a well-beaten track. This, evidently, was Phelan’s regular route to and from the cavern. It was clear enough, also, that the rift had been produced by some recent convulsion of nature. Its sides were not weather worn. Thinking that they might be getting what children call “warm,” the four adventurers slowed their pace, and advanced with arrows fitted to their bowstrings. But, when they reached the bottom, there was no sign of any cavern.

They were deep down below the surface of the desert, at the meeting point between the rift which they had descended and the long fissure which ran north and south. This last proved to be a veritable chasm. Its sides rose sheerly to a height which terrified, and the sky above seemed to be viewed through a mere slit. The floor of this gloomy gorge sloped steeply from the west side to the east, conveying the impression that the

two towering walls had slid apart. It was noticeable that the chasm showed along its sharp upper edges no sign of the softening effects of wind and rain; and this suggested that its origin may have been due to the same recent earth tremor which had produced the entering rift.

The floor was littered with jagged pieces of rock which had fallen during the convulsion; but between these fragments the track beaten by Phelan's feet was clearly visible. The fisherman had turned to the right—southward—and had passed out of sight round a slight bend in the gorge. Pursuit was easy: the man was confined between two walls and would need to keep straight on until he came to some exit; the followers had acquired a fairly accurate knowledge of the pace at which he traveled, and the slight windings of the chasm enabled them to keep out of his sight.

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In this fashion the chase continued for a distance of about a mile; and then the pursuers found themselves at a place where another tributary rift broke in—this time from the eastern side. Ascent there looked easy; but an inspection of the ground showed that Phelan's path ignored this exit and continued along the gorge.

Some twelve minutes later they realized that the chasm was coming to an end, not by growing less deep, but by the closing together of its sides. They judged, moreover, that they must be very near to the point from which the flying watchers had appeared to come. Phelan had just vanished round a sharp bend to the east, scarce forty yards away. Exceptional caution seemed called for. They advanced on tiptoe. Then they heard, immediately ahead of them, voices.

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Instinctively all four dropped to their hands and knees among the litter of rocks. Crawling forward, they peered round the bend.

They saw that the gorge ran on, narrowing rapidly, for another sixty yards eastward. There it ended. The walls came together till they met, leaving a thin crack where they touched. But the join was imperfect: at its lower end the crack widened to form a triangular orifice some ten feet high. Within that aperture was the blackness of night.

Phelan stood just outside, and he was talking to Circe. This was the Circe they knew, tall and regal, her golden hair flowing to her knees. From the flush in her cheeks and the glitter in her eyes it might be guessed that her temper was not entirely under control. The fisherman seemed to be in little better case.

He flung down the four salmon. “There’s your fish,” he said, “but it’s the last lot you’ll be after havin’. The power has gone from me.”

“Gone from you!” cried Circe. “Are you suggesting that they have broken their contract?”

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“It was the trick you played that did it,” growled Phelan. “The queer trick. You showed me a thing that I liked better than meself. You told me to act affection; and acting it was at the beginning. *But it was not acting at the end*—and that’s why they’ve taken the power from me.”

“But it was only me that you saw,” said Circe.

“It was *not* you,” cried the fisherman. “Tell me now, what was it that you did? You got the bundle of dates ready, the way you said you would—I saw them by the stone. But it was not you at all that was sittin’ by the river. I’m after thinkin’ that you feared they’d find you out once more, *so you got a real colleen from somewhere an’ put her there to do your work*—a fine little colleen, so friendly an’ all that none could mistrust her. An’ you made her think that she remembered me. Was that it?”

“Yes!” cried Circe passionately. “And it was the worst mistake that ever I have made. But I knew I could not act that part: I hated them too much.”

“Where did she come from?” demanded Phelan.

“Ah,” replied Circe, “that was a very great work of magic, the greatest that ever has been performed. She was someone whom they were bound to love at sight. Alas, it was useless! While I let her alone, they trusted her; but then she would not do what I wished. I had told her to offer the dates to everyone that passed (I knew you would not touch them); and, since I did not wish her to eat one herself before anyone had arrived, I mentioned that they would have an amusingly evil effect upon all who partook of them. But the brat offered them to none!”

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“Well, that was natural,” commented Phelan, “after what you’d said.”

Circe stared at him. “Natural!” she exclaimed. “It is not the way I should have behaved as a child.

“When it dawned upon me that her disobedience was deliberate,” continued the enchantress, “I was in a quandary. There was nothing left for me to do save to drive her mind from her body and put mine in its place. Thereafter, of course, they saw through me at once.”

“Where is she now?” cried Phelan fiercely.

Circe’s eyes flamed. “Do not speak to me in that fashion!” she hissed. “If my magic is as strong as I believe, I have destroyed her. You will never see her again, Phelan, neither in this world nor in the next. So, forget her. They will give you a new contract.” She turned away and entered the cavern.

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“I’m not wantin’ it,” growled Phelan. He picked up the salmon and followed her.

The four listeners crawled backward until the bend in the gorge hid them from the cavern’s mouth. Silently they rose and looked at one another.

“Destroyed! Destroyed! In this world and the next!” whispered Cleodolinda.

Sir Thomas moved to her side. “When a witch is killed, her spells cease to work,” he muttered. “There is hope yet, princess.”

“And if what I suspect be true, my daughter,” said the King in the same low tone, “we shall kill Circe this very day.”

“We can test that suspicion on the way back, sire,” whispered

St. George. The King nodded, and at a sign from him the party began the return journey.

At the tributary cleft which entered from the east, the King halted and looked at St. George with raised eyebrows.

“It would be the quickest way out,” affirmed the Knight, “and yonder range of low hills would make a safe retreat.”

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“We should need food and covering for the night, and it would mean a long journey in the morning,” said the King.

“We may have no choice in the matter,” replied St. George. The King agreed. The Princess, absorbed in her own thoughts, gave no heed to this conversation. Sir Thomas looked puzzled, but he held his peace. Enlightenment, he assumed, would come later.

They recommenced their journey, and came presently to the other rift—the one which ran out to the west and provided the way back home. The King did not pause here. His eyes were beginning to gleam with excitement, and St. George seemed to be similarly affected. The two men were almost running as they crossed the junction between rift and chasm and hastened on between the frowning walls.

Ten minutes later they noticed that the floor of the gorge was taking an upward trend, and that the cliffs were slightly lower. “Oh! good, good!” cried the King.

The morning was drawing on, and the sun was climbing in the sky. Suddenly it came into view through the gap

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above their heads. Its rays poured into the chasm where this ran before them; and the great walls glowed in response—glowed with a metallic sheen like that of bronze.

The King shouted and raced forward. St. George passed him, rushed to the gleaming walls and scraped at these with his hands. Turning, he held out to the breathless monarch a little pile of iridescent fungus.

“Good enough?” asked the King; and “Good enough,” replied St. George.

“I do not understand,” said the puzzled Princess. The sudden call upon her running powers had aroused her from her absorption.

“I can explain as we go home,” said the King.

He did.

* * * * *

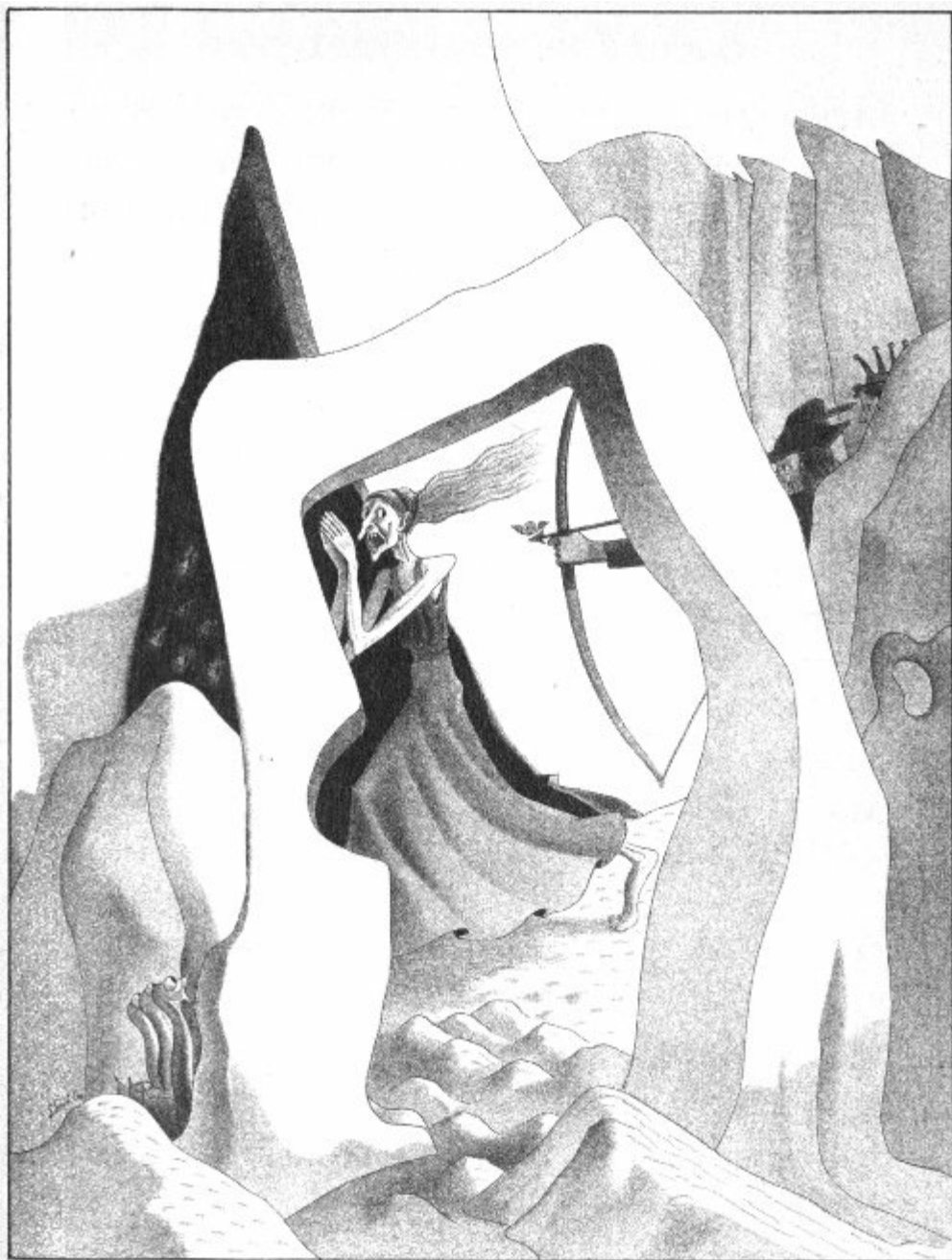
Evening again. The sinking sun was shining straight down the extreme southern end of the gorge where this bore round to the east. The shafts of light entered the mouth of the witches' cavern; and four people who were crouching among the rocks at the bend saw that the triangular orifice was the entrance to a long tunnel of similar shape. The sun vanished. Darkness came from behind the watchers, covered them, and stole slowly forward along the chasm floor. Presently it reached the mouth of the cavern, rose above this, and began to climb

steadily up the terminating junction of the walls. The cavern mouth grew black and menacing.

In the middle of that blackness there showed, suddenly, a flicker of white. A moment later, Circe emerged. She faced west, which was toward the four, put her hands together like one about to dive, and began the little run which would end by sending her up and out and away to the ridge above the hut. Then she checked herself abruptly; for four people had risen in her path, and four arrows were pointed at her heart.

For a moment she paled. Then she dropped her hands and smiled wickedly.

“Dear me,” she said softly, “what an extremely pleasant surprise. Have you come to pay us a visit, my Rupert? Cleodolinda too—looking for Rosaleen, perhaps? And St. George—very stiff and English. And Thomas—dressed in fine clothes and aping the manners of his betters. You are all welcome. I have playmates in there who will join me in that welcome if I raise my voice.”



She shrank back suddenly; for Sir Thomas had stepped forward, and there was no mistaking the hatred which glared

in the man's eyes. He was thinking of the little stone rabbit he had seen in the wood by the bridge.

"Do not be a fool, man," said Circe hastily. "Remember the volcano!"

"Princess," said the King, "the palace is in no danger. There is a newer and a deeper cleft in another part of the volcano's cone. It is thence that the lava will flow, and the torrent will pour itself—*into this gorge.*"

The enchantress stared at him—stared blankly until dawning comprehension widened her eyes. Incredulity, fear, fury, and again fear chased rapidly across a countenance which grew suddenly old and ugly and evil. She wheeled toward the cavern and curved her hands about her mouth. But the cry was never uttered, for Sir Thomas's arrow smote her between the shoulder blades, and she pitched forward lifeless to the ground.

The volcano was out of sight from the depths of this eastward-running portion of the gorge; but, as Circe fell, a flash of violet light illumined the summit of the tall boundary cliff. A moment later, a mutter as of distant thunder fell upon the ears of the four adventurers. They ran back round the bend of the chasm and stared northward. Here also, the volcano was not in view; but, far away, the strip of visible sky showed lurid as if a strange sun were setting in the wrong quarter.

Their attention was drawn from this sight by the sound of a slight movement among the stones in front of them. They

glanced in that direction—and grew rigid with amazement.

There, not ten yards away, gazing at them in puzzled fashion from beneath her mop of black, unruly curls, stood the little creature whom Phelan had called the “colleen.” She was occupied, apparently, in counting them; for her lips were moving anxiously as her finger pointed to each of the four in turn.

“There ought to be another,” she sighed at last. “A fisherman.” She turned blue eyes speculatively upon Cleodolinda, and the Princess went suddenly weak.

“The fisherman is here,” said a deep voice behind them. The King, St. George and Sir Thomas wheeled sharply.

Phelan raised a huge hand. “Let be!” he said. “It’s on your side that I am.” He stepped forward and gazed at the child’s flushed face and shining eyes.

“Listen you now, little colleen,” he said. “We’re all here, and I’m thinkin’ that you have something to tell us.”

The colleen wriggled with delight. “Oh, Phelan!” she cried. “You *are* clever. How ever did you guess that? But it’s true,” she added solemnly. “I was told to tell you—” She paused. “I can’t remember who told me,” she said anxiously. “Does that matter?”

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“No,” replied Phelan. “Quick now, what was the message?”

“I think,” said the child (the blue witchery was turned again upon Cleodolinda), “that one remembers best if one shuts

one's eyes, don't you?"

"If you don't hurry," said Phelan, "it's not Rosaleen but Chatterbox that I'll be callin' you."

The child put her hands behind her and screwed up her eyes till her nose wrinkled.

"I was to tell you," she began, "that I am Rosaleen—the Rosaleen you met first, not the one who came afterwards." She opened her eyes. "Was there another one?" she asked.

"Never mind that, darlin'," said Phelan. "Go on!"

The child shut her eyes again. "I was to tell you," she said, "that—that, oh, yes—that Circe wanted there to be by the riverbank someone whom—whom—yes, whom the Princess and her husband would like very much indeed. And then she thought it would be a good idea to have *me*." She opened her eyes. "That's all, I think," she said.

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"But—but—" said Cleodolinda, "who *are* you?" Yet she knew the answer before she spoke.

"Oh," said the child, "I forgot. They told me that. I am the little daughter who is coming to you in a year's time. That was what Circe knew."

She stood rubbing one leg against the other. "Do you mind?" she asked diffidently.

"Mind?" cried Cleodolinda. "*Mind?*" She fell on her knees and held out her arms. "Darling," she smiled, "I knew it from

the first.”

“Oh,” cried Rosaleen, “was that why you made me promise to come to you at the palace?” The Princess nodded.

“And I *did* promise,” said the child eagerly. “And now,” the blue of her eyes was heavenly, “I promise again.”

She smiled—and vanished.

Chapter XII

NEMESIS

“An’ Circe,” said the fisherman, “thought she had destroyed her. It’s a fool she was, that one; an’ it’s herself that’s been destroyed.”

He pointed northward up the gorge. “Get you all away!” he said urgently. “Away and up out of this the first chance you see. I heard you talking to Circe, an’ I know the lava is comin’ down. ‘Ten times hotter than before,’ said the words of the spell; it will run like water, I’m thinkin’. An’ you’ll be runnin’ toward it.”

“But you will come with us?” exclaimed the King.

“No,” said the fisherman. “Listen you to me, now,” he continued rapidly. “The creatures in yon cavern have no patience at all; and at nights it’s burnin’ to come out that they are. But they’re afraid of me, and Circe set me to stand outside every night to keep them in while she flew round for maybe fifteen minutes to see that all was safe. Then she’d call to me, sometimes from one place and sometimes from another, an’ I’d pass the word down into the hole. Now, unless I go back there quickly and show meself, them ones will not wait. They’ll be out an’ flyin’ up, an’ they’ll see the

volcano eruptin', an' they'll know that Circe must be dead. I've hidden her body behind a rock against the wall; but they'll see you running down the gorge. An' they'll be on to you like a swarm of hornets. So get you away and leave me here."

"But, Phelan," said Cleodolinda, "you will be caught by the lava! I feel sure that you cannot fly up like the others."

"Let be!" said the fisherman impatiently. "Didn't the colleen call after me this mornin' to help her; an' didn't I obey me orders an' walk on? It's fine I'd be helpin' her now if I let you be killed an' her never be born at all."

He turned away; but, just before he reached the corner, he looked back at the King, and grinned. "Were you hopin' to catch them creatures with the lava?" he asked. "Creatures that can fly like eagles, an' the lava roarin' a warnin' from a mile away? Well, maybe you'll do it, but you'll need the help of Phelan the fisherman. He'll be holdin' them for you, like this."

He picked up a forty-pound stone with one huge hand and hurled it up the gorge as if it had been a child's ball. He lifted a half-ton rock above his head with both arms as if it weighed no more than a melon, and replaced it on the ground. "They'll not try to pass these boundin' down yon narrow passage," he said. "I'm thinkin' they'll be flyin' back to the underground lakes. But it's not water that will help them." He strode on.

"Phelan," cried Cleodolinda, "I will tell her what you did

when she is old enough to understand.”

“Let be. Let be,” said the fisherman. “I’m an Irishman, an’ I have the Sight. I’ll be seein’ her before you do—in fifteen minutes maybe.” He waved his hand without turning, and vanished round the corner.

* * * * *

Running along the rock-littered floor of the winding gorge was a matter for expert judgment, and the three men allowed Cleodolinda to take the lead. She avoided the temptation to cut across the bends, leaping rocks on the way; for she knew that steady pace and steady effort pays best in a long run. She kept right up against the left (western) wall; for here, owing to the slope in the chasm floor, the ground was free from rocks. She aimed at completing the required mile in ten minutes. This she knew to be the most that she could expect from her father.

Almost at the outset a westward bending of the gorge brought the volcano into momentary view, and the sight was so wildly wonderful that the runners halted instinctively to take it in. St. George had expected to see a steady torrent of flames spouting beneath a huge, rolling cloud of dense black smoke. Nothing of that kind was apparent. The top of the cone was incandescent, and from this rounded puffs of white-hot vapor were being shot up to such a height and in such rapid succession that there were seldom less than four in the air at once. They did not stream away; they vanished as they rose. From the deep cleft in the eastern side to the blazing pine forests below, the lava stream showed as a dazzling sky

line dotted above with thousands of little puffs of flaming gas. The Knight could make nothing of this. The King thought: Stupid, reckless woman—ten times hotter than before—just the sort of extravagant thing she *would* say—half the stuff must be vaporizing—we shall be lucky if the mountain itself does not melt. He kept these thoughts, however, to himself.



It was only for a few seconds that the runners paused;
for the sight of that lava stream was sufficient to set them

racing forward again. With one accord they threw away, as they ran, their weapons, their crossed baldrics and their bundles of provisions. When they had lightened themselves thus, Cleodolinda slightly increased the speed.

Three minutes later they met a warm wind blowing down the gorge. A minute after that the wind was hot.

There came a cry from the King. The others turned their heads as they ran. The Monarch was staggering along, gasping for breath. They waited for him to catch up, although he waved to them to leave him.

“Run your fastest, Cleodolinda!” he panted as he arrived. “You have twice the speed of any here. Follow her, St. George! Remember your daughter. Thomas may manage yet. I am done.”

The Princess stared at him frantically. She turned wild eyes to her husband.

“Unbuckle your belts!” said St. George quickly. His own was off as he spoke. The Princess obeyed instantly, though uncomprehendingly, and the other two followed suit. Swiftly the Knight linked the four belts together to make a single long strap. He thrust one end of this into Cleodolinda’s hand, grasped the leather a yard behind her, and signaled to the others to catch on. Sir Thomas passed the other end to the King, and fell into position just behind St. George. Cleodolinda gave a gasp of relief. “Are you ready?” she cried. “Then—forward!”

Towed by three people, the King found that his fatigue had

vanished as if by magic. But time invaluable had been lost. Moreover, the pace of the whole party had been reduced.

They ran on for another five minutes. Night was falling; but the gorge was growing steadily lighter. The visible sky had become a strip of pulsating brilliance. The wind grew stifling.

“Leave us, Cleodolinda!” gasped St. George. “You lack strength for this pulling. Leave us.”

“No!” cried the Princess. “Look! I should gain no more than thirty seconds. There is the rift!”

They were rounding a bend at the moment, and all saw the ravine on the right that led from this deathtrap to safety. But all heard, in that same instant, a curious noise coming down the gorge. It was a popping sound—something like *pitter—pitter—pitter—pitter*.

Marvelous are the effects of fear. It is probable that the speed of the party during the next half minute was actually doubled. Flying over the intervening stretch of gorge, they whirled into the kindly shelter of the ravine. The burning wind blew on their backs as they scrambled up the slope, but it died away as they mounted.

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“On!” shouted St. George. “We shall be roasted if we stop here!” The popping noise coming down the gorge had taken on a deeper note.

There was no beaten path in this rift, and the ascent involved much clambering over rocks. The long strap hindered this, and they dropped it.

“I cannot run,” panted the King, “but I can climb with any man.” He proved this by passing Sir Thomas.

They reached the top of the rift and found themselves between two ridges in the eastern desert. Rounding the one on their left, they came full into the glare of the incandescent cone. Beneath the dazzling effulgence of that shape, the flames of the burning pine forest looked dull and dingy. St. George, shielding his eyes with his hand, drew back into the shelter of the ridge. As he did so there came from the gorge they had left a roaring like that of a cannonade. “We had best stay here,” said the Knight. “The lava will not reach us, and we are sheltered from its heat.”

“No! No!” cried the King. “We are far too near the cavern.” He looked to where, ahead of them, the line of low hills running eastward threw black shadows over the desert. “We shall never reach those in time,” he groaned. “There are caves there.” His gaze swept slowly to the right. Then he gave a start of surprise. “Look!” he cried. “Let us make for that.”

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Not more than two hundred yards to the northeast there showed, pale in the light from the volcano, the lower slopes of a long spur which ran backward and upward into the darkness of the hills. The King raced for this; the others, puzzled but obedient to his lead, followed him.

As they mounted the slope, a blast of heat smote upon them from the left. Looking in that direction, they saw that the upper edges of the gorge from which they had escaped had just come into view. The whole visible line of the chasm to

the northward was a white-hot furnace belching spouts of incandescent gas. Southward, the blaze had passed the rift and was nearly halfway on toward the cavern. It looked like a fiery serpent, its head wriggling from side to side as it rushed forward.

“On! On!” shouted the King. “Look for boulders! Look for crevices!”

“What is it that you fear, sire?” cried St. George.

199

“The underground lakes!” panted the King. “When the lava reaches them!”

They found no crevices; but they came to a narrow belt of pine trees winding across the spur, and one of these had fallen. It was larger than the others, and the shallow soil at its roots had not provided sufficient anchorage. It had pitched downhill—toward the south—but the trees in front of it had prevented it from falling prone. Consequently, the hole behind its base was sheltered on the south side by a great tilted mass of root-bound earth. The King gave a sigh of relief.

“This will have to do,” he said. “Stand by it, and jump into the hole when the explosion comes.”

“Explosion!” said Cleodolinda.

“When that awful, superheated lava reaches those lakes,” explained the King, “they will flash into steam. Half the countryside will go up. Fortunately,” he added, “it will be the desert half.”

“But why are we in danger here?” asked the Princess.

“Because Heaven alone knows what will fall from the skies afterwards,” said the King, “and we are only two miles away.”

The short distance they had traveled up the spur had not sufficed to take them out of sight of the cone. The King turned toward that white-hot mass and inspected it with some anxiety.

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“The top is considerably lower,” he announced. “The blasts of hot gas are melting it away. But the rift in the east has deepened; and it has widened, into the bargain. The lava level inside must be sinking.”

Sir Thomas spoke—for the first time since they had left the cavern. “How long will the eruption last, sire?” he said.

“You heard what the spell was,” replied the King. “‘Enough lava to fill an entire country’ were the words. The hermit spoke of the witches’ underground domain as a kingdom of their own; so the lava, I take it, will cease to flow when it has filled that country. If not, it will flood out merely into the desert.”

“It has reached the cavern,” cried St. George.

They wheeled round. The head of the fiery serpent had made its last visible wriggle—to the left.

“Ave!” said the King solemnly. “There goes a good man.”

They saw with some anxiety that the lava at that point had filled the gorge to the brim and was overflowing into the country on both sides. But a moment later a huge blast of flame shot up from the center of the pool; and the flood subsided, pouring back into the gorge.

“Air in the passage,” commented the King. “Holding up the flow. There will be more of that.”

There was: it happened twice again. Then the King spoke sharply. “Look out now!” he said. “Bolt for the hole when it happens—and put your fingers in your ears!”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a tract of desert extending from the gorge to the hermit’s hut and for two miles southeast of that rose suddenly in a huge hump. Then it opened, and a vast cloud of steam, flame, sand, boulders and white-hot rocks soared up into the sky. The four watchers sprang to their shelter, and thrust fingers into their ears. For several seconds they crouched in a complete calm. Then they were stunned by a concussion that snapped branches from the pine trees. When they recovered their hearing, crash after crash of thunderous sound was pealing through the firmament. There was a nearer crash as a white-hot rock struck the ground a hundred yards in front of them, splitting into fragments which bounded over the belt of trees and went careering down the sides of the spur. All the desert in the nearer neighborhood of the catastrophe was spouting under a bombardment of similar missiles of every degree of temperature.

The fall of heavy rocks was followed by a shower of

small stones; but these, being from the surface of the land, were not hot. They struck, however, with considerable force; and they thudded on to, and all around, the refuge. Fortunately, the sheltering mass of roots and earth proved impervious to their assault.

No sand fell; and the four adventurers, peering out to discover the reason for this, realized that no such fall was likely to occur in the Queen's country. The light sand, carried to an immense height in the blast of steam, would take a long time to descend against the resistance of the atmosphere. It was hanging now in a dense, dun cloud high above the scene of desolation; but the cloud was drifting steadily eastward, and it was evident that the fall, when it came, would take place in the uninhabited desert which lay in that direction.

The great hump which had arisen above the witches' domain had subsided since the explosion. Indeed, the territory there had sunk to below the level of the surrounding land. Rent by a thousand fissures, it had collapsed to fill the vast caverns beneath.

"The question is now," said the King, "whether the lava will cease flowing after it has filled that hollow, and, if not, whither it will go." He turned toward the volcano.

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"Saints in Heaven!" he shouted. "It has stopped!"

The cone glared still in the night sky, and its incandescence was blinding. But no puffs of vapor were issuing from its summit, and no lava was streaming from the cleft.

Then Sir Thomas, the expert, spoke.

“Remember,” he said, “that when a witch is killed her spells cease to have effect. The spell laid upon yonder volcano was repeated by every creature in Circe’s horde, so that, while one of these remained alive, the lava would continue to pour forth until the commands of that spell had been fulfilled.

“That the flow ceased when the cavern blew up can mean but one thing. Phelan fulfilled his promise. He held those creatures in; and every single one of them was killed by the explosion.”

“I shall,” said his Majesty King Rupert of Silene, “alter my coat of arms. The dexter supporter shall be the fisherman. It is to him that I shall owe the continuance of my line, and he was a man whom it is an honor to have known.”

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In the palace, the court magician ceased his idiot babbling, and asked to be told how long he had been asleep.

* * * * *

In the wood of the dragon drive, a weeping mahout, kneeling at the feet of a huge stone elephant, felt the mighty limb which his arms were encircling grow suddenly warm. A moment later there came a soft, caressing touch upon his shoulder. He looked up.

“Hannibal! Glorious one!” he cried. The elephant trumpeted, coiled his trunk around his master and slave, and lifted the man to his neck. Then, trumpeting again, he turned heavily and marched, crashing through the undergrowth, in the

direction of the castle.

* * * * *

At the edge of the wood by the bridge, Walter stood wondering how it had come to pass that he was holding Miranda in his arms. Since, however, it seemed to be a fact that she was there, he proceeded to emphasize that fact in the proper manner.

“But, Walter! This is so sudden!” cried the girl. Then she slid her arms round his neck. “Oh, Walter,” she sighed. “I thought you were *never* going to speak.”

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* * * * *

On the spur of the eastern hills the King, the Princess, St. George and Sir Thomas were getting ready for the long march home. Preparations were simple: they had nothing to carry; they were standing up; they had merely to turn in the right direction. That lay northward, through a pass in the hills which would keep them at a sufficient distance from the glowing cone. Thereafter they would have to circle round behind the volcano. They hoped that this would be cool enough by morning to allow them to work down the frontier to the palace. Failing that, they meant to strike across to the King’s castle.

The Monarch led the way, talking to Sir Thomas behind him. “There is no need for you to worry about Miranda,” he said. “She has a protector with her, and I know him for an excellent man, and one with his wits about him.”

He sighed. "It was a good war," he said, and marched on in silence.

Cleodolinda, with her hand tucked within St. George's arm, was also silent. Silent for so long that the Knight glanced down at her a little anxiously. He saw that she had a faraway look in her eyes, and that a queer little smile was curving the corners of her mouth. She felt his gaze, and turned her head.

"Do you realize," she said, "that we shall have to ask Aunt Sophia to invite us to stay with her next year?"

"But she will not mind that," replied St. George confidently.

The Princess faced him with a laugh and a frown. "What I mean," she admitted, "is: do you really *want* a daughter?"

"Oh!" said the Knight. It was his turn to smile reminiscently.

"I want that one," he affirmed emphatically, looking down into the anxious upturned face.

"Ah!" breathed the Princess, starry-eyed. The others were not looking; so he picked her up like a feather and signified his satisfaction in a manner satisfactory to both.



THE ARK OF HERALDRY

by MELRICH V. ROSENBERG

Illustrated by ELINORE BLAISDELL

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ST. GEORGE AND THE WITCHES

by J. W. DUNNE

Illustrated by LLOYD COE

Everyone remembers about St. George; how he conquered and slew the dragon, saved the princess, became a hero and acquired a halo. But that wasn't the end of the story. In fact the best part of all is what happened afterward.

He married the princess of course. *Noblesse oblige* demanded that, and anyway Cleodolinda was a charming person and with a mind of her own. She knew a good thing when she saw it. One day, St. George undertook to demonstrate for the benefit of his father-in-law, the King, the proper technique for dragon slaying—Cleodolinda having had a taste of his skill already. But the dragon-drive unhappily flushed Howling Harriet, a thoroughly vicious witch, from her covert in the forest. From that moment all three of them were embroiled in adventure, magic, and witches. It took all the King's wisdom, St. George's courage, and a bit of quick thinking by Cleodolinda to get them safely home again.

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THE JUMPING LIONS OF BORNEO

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[The end of *St. George and the Witches* by J. W. Dunne]