The Worm OUROBOROS

[Complete & Well Illustrated Edition]

E. R. Eddison

Illustrations

By

Keith Henderson

The Worm Ouroboros *(1922)* is a heroic high fantasy novel by Eric Rücker Eddison. The book describes the protracted war between the domineering King Gorice of Witchland and the Lords of Demonland in an imaginary world that appears mainly medieval and partly reminiscent of Norse sagas.

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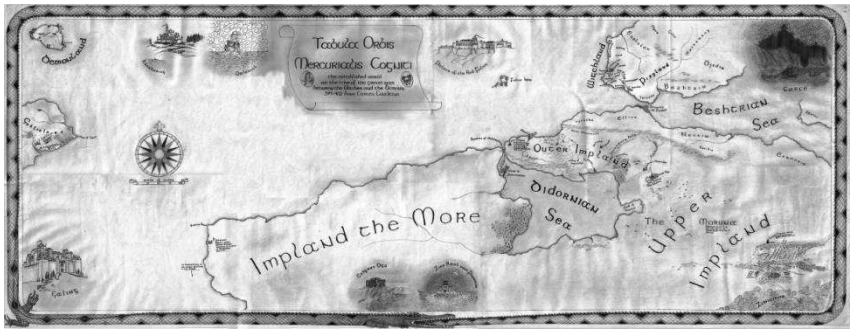
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Illustrations

by Keith Henderson

London; Jonathan Cope

1922

Dedication

To W. G. E. *and to my friends* K. H. *and* G. C. L. M. *I dedicate this book*. It is neither allegory nor fable but a Story to be read for its own sake.

The proper names I have tried to spell simply. The *e* in Carcë is long, like that in Phryne, the *o* in Krothering short and the accent on that syllable: Corund is accented on the first syllable, Prezmyra on the second, Brandoch Daha on the first and fourth, Gorice on the last syllable, rhyming with thrice: Corinius rhymes with Flaminius, Galing with sailing, La Fireez with desire ease: *ch* is always guttural, as in loch.

E. R. E.

9th January 1922

ABOUT AUTHOR:



Eric Rücker Eddison, (1882 –1945) was an English civil servant and author, writing under the name **E. R. Eddison**.

Biography:

Born in Adel, Leeds, Eddison's early education came from a series of private tutors, whom he shared with the young Arthur Ransome. Ransome recalls Eddison's daring and machiavellian methods of getting rid of unpopular teachers in his autobiography. Afterwards Eddison was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Oxford and joined the Board

of Trade in 1906, retiring in 1938 to work full-time on his fiction. He was also a member of the Viking Society for Northern Research. During a distinguished career he was appointed a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1924 and a Companion of the Order of the Bath in 1929 for public service with the Board of Trade. He and his wife had one child, a daughter. Their son-in-law, Kenneth Hesketh Higson, a Royal Air Force pilot, died in an air fight over Italy in the Second World War.

Writing:

Eddison is best known for the early romance *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) and for three volumes set in the imaginary world Zimiamvia, known as the Zimiamvian Trilogy: *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), and *The Mezentian Gate* (1958).

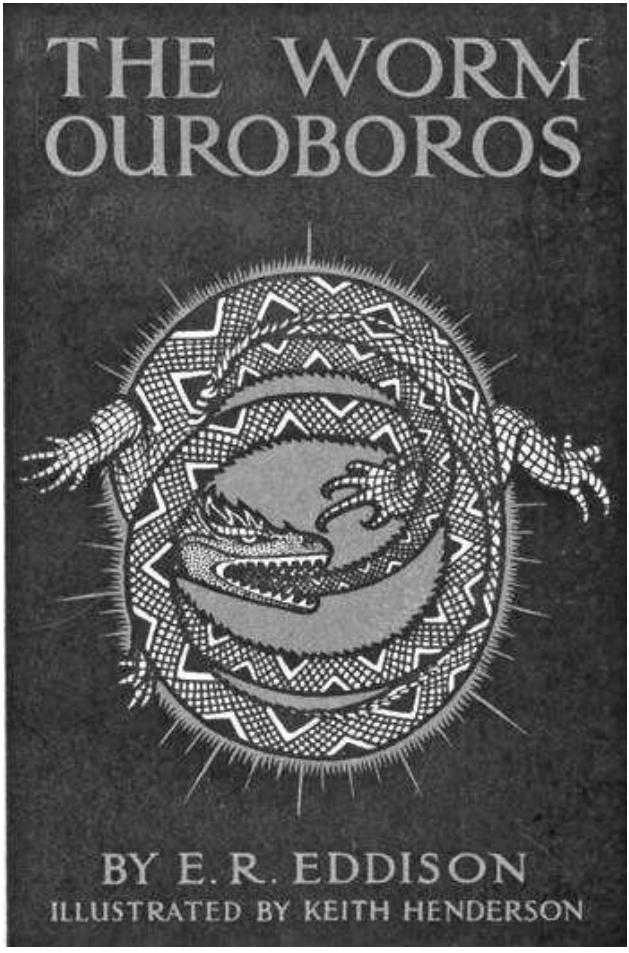
These early works of high fantasy drew strong praise from J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, (alongside whom he was considered an occasional member of the Inklings) and later, Ursula K. Le Guin. Tolkien generally approved Eddison's literary style, but found the underlying philosophy rebarbative; while Eddison in turn thought Tolkien's views "soft". Other admirers of Eddison's work included James Stephens, who wrote the introduction to the 1922 edition; James Branch Cabell, who provided a foreword for the 1926 American edition; Robert Silverberg, who described *The Worm Ouroboros* as "the greatest high fantasy of them all"; and Clive Barker.

Eddison's books are written in a meticulously recreated Jacobean prose style, seeded throughout with fragments, often acknowledged but often directly copied from his favoriteauthors and genres: Homer and Sappho, Shakespeare and Webster,Norse sagas and French medieval lyric poems. Critic Andy Sawyer has noted that such fragments seem to arise naturally from the "barbarically sophisticated" worlds Eddison has created. The books exhibit a thoroughly aristocratic sensibility; heroes and villains alike maintain an Olympian indiffe-

rence to convention. Fellow fantasy author Michael Moorcock wrote that Eddison's characters, particularly his villains, are more vivid than Tolkien's. Others have observed that while it is historically accurate to depict the great of the world trampling on the lower classes, Eddison's characters often treat their subjects with arrogance and insolence, and this is depicted as part of their greatness. Indeed, at the end of "***The Worm Ouroboros***", the heroes, finding peace dull, pray for – and get – the revival of their enemies, so that they may go and fight them again. Fantasy historian Brian Attebery notes that "Eddison's fantasies uphold a code that is unabashedly Nietzschean; had he written after World War II, his enthusiasm for supermen and heroic conflict might perhaps have been tempered".

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ABOUT THE BOOK:



The Worm Ouroboros is a heroic high fantasy novel by Eric Rücker Eddison, first published in 1922. The book describes the protracted war between the domineering King Gorice of Witchland and the Lords of Demonland in an imaginary world that appears mainly medieval and partly reminiscent of Norse sagas. The work is slightly related to Eddison's la-

ter Zimiamvian Trilogy, and collectively they are sometimes referred to as the Zimiamvian series.

A framing story in the first two chapters describes the world of the novel asMercury, though it is clearly a fantasy version of Earth, a "secondary world"; no effort was made to conform to the scientific knowledge of Mercury as it existed at the time of writing. At a number of points the characters refer to their land as Middle earth, used here in its original sense of "the known world", and the gods worshipped have the names of deities from Greek mythology.

Oddly, the introductory framing story, has a beginning, but is not referred to once the actual fantasy adventure begins. (Framing, as a technique, usually opens and closes a separate story contained inside the frame-narrative.)

The framing story having introduced the chief lords of Demonland — the brothers Juss, Spitfire, and Goldry Bluszco, and their cousin Brandoch Daha — the story begins in earnest with a dwarf ambassador from Witchland arriving in Demonland to demand that the Demons recognize King Gorice XI of Witchland as their overlord. Juss and his brothers reply that they and all of Demonland will submit if the king (a famous wrestler) can defeat Goldry Bluszco in a wrestling match.

The match is held in the neutral territory of the Foliot Isles, and Gorice is killed. His successor (or reincarnation) Gorice XII is a sorcerer who banishes Goldry to an enchanted mountain prison, by means of a perilous sorcery requiring the help of the devious Goblin traitor Lord Gro.

While Lord Spitfire is sent back to raise an army out of Demonland, Lord Juss and his cousin Brandoch Daha, aided by King Gaslark of Goblinland, attempt an assault on Carcë, the capital of the Witches, where they think Goldry is held. The rescue fails, the Goblins flee, and Juss and Brandoch Daha are both captured. They escape with the aid of La Fireez, the prince of Pixyland and vassal of King Gorice, who helps them at great personal cost because he owes them a debt of honor.

Juss and Brandoch Daha return home to Demonland and then start an expedition to rescue Goldry Bluszco from his terrible prison, somewhere past

the mountains of Impland. Lord Spitfire again stays behind to lead Demonland's armies against an expected invasion from Witchland.

The expedition's fleet is smashed and its army destroyed. Juss and Brandoch Daha meet with three strange enchanted heroes of an earlier time, and Lord Juss is later nearly killed by a manticore. After a year of wandering they climb the mighty peak of Koshtra Pivrarcha and then attempt the even more difficult peak of Koshtra Belorn. Before reaching the summit of Koshtra Belorn they encounter Queen Sophonisba, a royal from that area to whom the Gods had granted eternal youth when her realm was laid waste by the Witches.

From Sophonisba they learn that Goldry is held in prison on the top of Zora Rach Nam, a mountain which cannot be climbed and whose peak is surrounded by unceasing flames. There is only one way to free him: they must find a hippogriff's egg, and one of them must ride the newly hatched hippogriff. Queen Sophonisba gives Lord Juss one hippogriff egg. Alas, their lone companion, the Impland native Mivarsh Faz (knowing that he will have to walk back home alone, if the Demons get the hippogriff) steals the egg and tries to use it himself, causing his death. Lord Juss and Brandoch Daha set out for home, their quest defeated for the time being. But matters are not completely hopeless, as one of Queen Sophonisba's martlet scouts have told them of another hippogriff egg, lying at the bottom of a lake in Demonland.

Meanwhile, the armies of Witchland have attacked Demonland. Duke Corsus is the first commander of the Witchland army, and conquers part of Demonland, but is defeated by Spitfire. A new Witchland army, under the command of Lord Corinius, defeats Spitfire and captures most of Demonland. This includes Brandoch Daha's castle of Krothering, which had been watched over by his sister Lady Mevrian.

At this point, Lord Gro changes sides and helps Lady Mevrian escape from the grasp of Corinius, who wishes to marry her against her will. A few months later, Lord Juss and Brandoch Daha return and expel the Witches from Demonland.

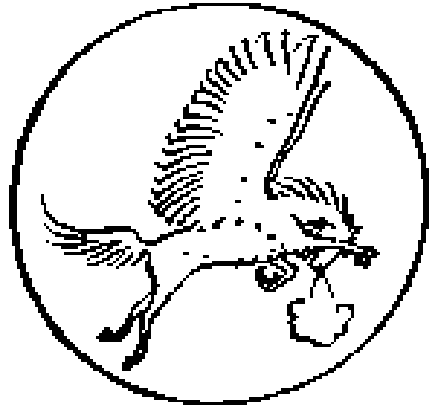
Equipped with a new hippogriff egg, Lord Juss makes a second attempt to rescue his brother, and this time is successful. However, his forces are

trapped in an inland sea by the Witchland navy; forced to engage in battle directly, they completely destroy that navy. La Fireez dies in this battle.

The Demons then sail to Carcë and face the remaining forces of Witchland in a climactic struggle. In the battle, Lord Gro is lambasted by Corund for switching sides; Gro responds by killing a Demon and is himself killed by Spitfire. Corund dies from wounds he suffers fighting with the heroes of Demonland.

His armies having failed, King Gorice attempts another terrible summoning; lacking the aid of Gro, he is unable to complete the spell and is destroyed. Duke Corsus poisons the remaining nobles of Witchland, and is killed himself by the dying Corinius.

Characters:



Emblem of Demonland

The Demons and their Allies:

- **Lord Juss** is the chief lord of Demonland and a chief player in most of the battles in the story. He also leads two expeditions to rescue his brother Goldry Bluszco.
- **Goldry Bluszco** is the brother of the hero and one of the chief lords of Demonland. Bluszco has two brothers, Lord Juss and Lord Spitfire. Un-

like his bachelor brothers, Bluszco was betrothed to marry Princess Armelline of Goblinland.

- **Lord Spitfire** is a Demon lord who spends most of the story in Demonland fighting the various Witchland invasions. His chief residence is the castle Owlswick.

- **Brandoch Daha** is a lord of Demonland and the greatest swordsman of the age. After Corinius sacks his castle of Krothering, Brandoch Daha swears vengeance against Corinius.

- **Lady Mevrian** is a great lady of Demonland and the sister of Brandoch Daha, who is left the task of defending her brother's castle of Krothering against Corinius's army. After a siege, the castle is taken and Lady Mevrian has to fend off the advances of Corinius. She is able to escape only with the aid of Heming and Cargo (Corund's sons) and Lord Gro, who betrays Witchland to help her.

- **Prince La Fireez** is the ruler of Pixyland. Witchland has asserted suzerainty over his land, but he is consistently a Demon ally by way of repaying Lord Juss for saving his life. He dies in a naval battle.



Emblem of Witchland

The Witchlanders and their Allies:

- **Gorice** is the King of Witchland, ruling from Carcë; he is said to be a single king with twelve incarnations. His eleventh incarnation, a champion wrestler, is killed in a wrestling match by Goldry Bluszco; his twelfth, a sorcerer, wears a signet ring in the shape of the ouroboros of the book's title.

- **Corinius** is a warrior leader of Witchland, full of life and ambition. He is an enemy of Demonland, and as warrior of some skill he commands some respect from the lords of Demonland. He is poisoned by Duke Corsus and dies right after the Demons take Carcë.

- **Duke Corsus** is one of the war leaders of the armies of Witchland. Duke Corsus was the chief war leader of Witchland a decade before the story begins. Corsus is wily and skillful but prone to drinking and no longer young. Right before the Demons conquer Carcë, he poisons Corinius, his wife Zenambria, his son Dekalajus, Corund's son Viglus, and Corund's son Heming. Corinius killed him when he realized that Corsus had poisoned him.

- **Lord Corund** is the chief war leader of the armies of Witchland. He is a noble man, a mighty warrior, and has some respect from the main characters. Corund leads the Witchland army against the Demonland expedition to Impland. He is fatally wounded by Lord Juss.

- **Lord Gro** is an advisor to Witchland; later he is an ally of Demonland. Gro is originally from Goblinland and was the foster-brother of King Gaslark before a falling-out. Gro is a famous explorer and wrote a book about his travels through Impland. Gro provides crucial aid to King Gorice XII of Witchland when he summons the magic which carries Goldry Bluszco away. He acts as an advisor and trusted messenger to the King regarding the campaign in Demonland. While in Demonland he meets and falls in love with Brandoch Daha's sister, the Lady Mevrian. Because of his love, he betrays the Witchland army and helps Mevrian escape from Corinius after Corinius captures her brother's castle of Krothering.

- **Lady Prezmyra** is the young wife of Corund and the sister of La Fireez of Pixyland. She is a close friend of Lord Gro, and poisons her-

self, after the death of her husband and her brother, when the Demons conquer Carcë.

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Thomas the Rhymer

TRUE Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
A ferlie he spied wi his ee;
And there he saw a Lady bright
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

Her skirt was o the grass-green silk,
Her mantle o the velvet fyne,
At ilka tett of her horse's mane
Hung fifty siller bells and nine.

True Thomas he pulld aff his cap,
And louted low down on his knee:
"Hail to thee, Mary, Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth could never be."

"O no, O no, Thomas," she says,
"That name does not belong to me;
I'm but the Queen of fair Elfland,
That am hither come to visit thee.

"Harp and carp, Thomas," she says,
"Harp and carp alang wi me.
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your bodie I will be."

"Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunton me."

Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

- THOMAS THE RHYMER -

Introduction



THE Worm Ouroboros, no worm, but the Serpent itself, is a wonderful book. As a story or as prose it is wonderful, and, there being a cause for every effect, the reason for writing it should be as marvellous again.

Shelley had to write the Prometheus Unbound, he was under compulsion; for a superhuman energy had come upon him, and he was forced to create a matter that would permit him to imagine, and

think, and speak like a god. It was so with Blake, who willed to appear as a man but existed like a mountain; and, at their best, the work of these poets is inhuman and sacred. It does not greatly matter that they had or had not a message. It does not matter at all that either can be charged with nonsense or that both have been called madmen — the same charge might be laid against a volcano or a thunderbolt — or this book. It does not matter that they could transcend human endurance, and could move tranquilly in realms where lightning is the norm of speed. The work of such poets is sacred because it outpaces man, and, in a realm of their own, wins even above Shakespeare.

An energy such as came on the poets has visited the author of this book, and his dedicatory statement, that "it is neither allegory nor fable but a story to be read for its own sake," puts us off with the assured arrogance for of the poet who is too busy creating to have time for school-mastering. But, waking or in dream, this author has been in strange regions and has supped at a torrent which only the greatest know of.

The story is a long one — this reader would have — liked it twice as long. The place of action is indicated, casually, as the planet Mercury, and the story tells of the, wars between two great kingdoms of that planet, and the final overthrow of one.

Mr. Eddison is a vast man. He needed a whole cosmos to play in, and created one; and he forged a prose to tell of it that is as gigantic as his tale. In reading this book the reader must a little break his way in, and must surrender prejudices that are not allowed for. He may think that the language is more rotund than is needed for a tale, but, as he proceeds, he will see that only such a tongue could be spoken by these colossi; and, soon, he will delight in a prose that is as life-giving as it is magnificent.

Mr. Eddison's prose never plays him false; it rises and falls with his subject, and is tender, humorous, sour, precipitate and terrific as the occasion warrants. How nicely the Kaga danced for the Red Foliot.

"Foxy-red above, but with black bellies, round furry faces, innocent amber eyes and great soft paws. . . . On a sudden the music ceased, and the dancers were still, and standing side by side, paw in furry paw, they bowed shyly to the company, and the Red Foliot called them to, him, and kissed them on the mouth, and sent them to their seats."

"Corund leaned on the parapet and shaded his eyes with his hand, that was broad as a smoked haddock, and covered on the back with yellow hairs growing somewhat sparsely as the hairs on the skin of a young elephant."

"A dismal tempest suddenly surprised them. For forty days it swept them in hail and sleet over wide wallowing ocean, without a star, without a course."

"Night came down on the hills. A great wind moaning out of the hueless west tore the clouds as a ragged garment, revealing the lonely moon that fled naked betwixt them."

"Dawn came like a lily, saffron-hued, smirked with smoke-gray streaks, that slanted from the north."

"He was naked to the waist, his hair, breast and arms to the armpits clotted and adrop with blood and in his hands two bloody daggers."

Quotations can give some idea of the rhythm of his sentences, but it can give none of the massive sweep and intensity of his narrative. Milton fell in love with the devil because the dramatic action lay with him, and, in this book, Mr. Eddison trounces his devils for

being naughty (the word "bad" has not significance here), but he trounces the Wizard King and his kingdom with affection and delight. What gorgeous monsters are Gorice the Twelfth and Corund and Corinius. The reader will not easily forget them; nor Gorice's great antagonist Lord Juss; nor the marvellous traitor, Lord Gro, with whom the author was certainly in love; nor the great fights and the terrible fighters Lords Brandoch Daha and Goldry Bluszco, and a world of others and their wives; nor will he forget the mountain Koshtra Pivrarcha, that had to be climbed, and was climbed — as dizzying a feat as literature can tell of.

"So huge he was that even here at six miles distance the eye might not at a glance behold him, but must sweep back and forth as over a broad landscape, from the ponderous roots of the mountain, where they sprang black and sheer from the glacier up the vast face, where buttress was piled upon buttress, and tower upon tower, in a blinding radiance of ice-hung precipice and snow-filled gully, to the lone heights where, like spears menacing high heaven, the white teeth of the summit-ridge cleft the sky."

Mr. Eddison's prose does not derive from the English Bible. His mind has more affinities with Celtic imaginings and method, and his work is Celtic in that it is inspired by beauty and daring rather than by thoughts and moralities. He might be Scotch or Irish: scarcely the former, for, while Scotland loves full-mouthed verse, she, like England, is prose-shy. But, from whatever heaven Mr. Eddison come, he has added a masterpiece to English literature.

- JAMES STEPHENS

The Induction



THERE was a man named Lessingham dwelt in an old low house in Wastdale, set in a gray old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seedling time. Lily and rose and larkspur bloomed in the borders, and begonias with blossoms big as saucers, red and white and pink and lemon-colour, in the beds before the porch. Climbing roses, honeysuckle, clematis, and the scarlet flame-flower scrambled up the walls. Thick woods were on every side without the garden, with a gap north-eastward

opening on the desolate lake and the great fells beyond it: Gable rearing his crag-bound head against the sky from behind the straight clean outline of the Screes.

Cool long shadows stole across the tennis lawn. The air was golden. Doves murmured in the trees; two chaffinches played on the near post of the net; a little water-wagtail scurried along the path. A French window stood open to the garden, showing darkly a dining-room panelled with old oak, its Jacobean table bright with flowers and silver and cut glass and Wedgwood dishes heaped with fruit: greengages, peaches, and green muscat grapes. Lessingham lay back in a hammock-chair watching through the blue smoke of an after-dinner cigar the warm light on the Gloire de Dijon roses that clustered about the bedroom window overhead. He had her hand in his. This was their House.

"Should we finish that chapter of Njal?" she said.

She took the heavy volume with its faded green cover, and read: "He went out on the night of the Lord's day, when nine weeks were still to winter; he heard a great crash, so that he thought both heaven and earth shook. Then he looked into the west airt, and he thought he saw hereabouts a ring of fiery hue, and within the ring a man on a gray horse. He passed quickly by him, and rode hard. He had a flaming firebrand in his hand, and he rode so close to him that he could see him plainly. He was black as pitch, and he sung this song with a mighty voice —

Here I ride swift steed,
His flank flecked with rime,
Rain from his mane drips,
Horse mighty for harm;
Flames flare at each end,
Gall glows in the midst,

So fares it with Flosi's redes
As this flaming brand flies;
And so fares it with Flosi's redes
As this flaming brand flies.

"Then he thought he hurled the firebrand east towards the fells before him, and such a blaze of fire leapt up to meet it that he could not see the fells for the blaze. It seemed as though that man rode east among the flames and vanished there.

"After that he went to his bed, and was senseless for a long time, but at last he came to himself. He bore in mind all that had happened, and told his father, but he bade him tell it to Hjallti Skeggi's son. So he went and told Hjallti, but he said he had seen 'the Wolf's Ride, and that comes ever before great tidings.'"

They were silent awhile; then Lessingham. said suddenly, "Do you mind if we sleep in the east wing to-night?"

"What, in the Lotus Room?"

"Yes."

"I'm too much of a lazy-bones to-night, dear," she answered.

"Do you mind if I go alone, then? I shall be back to breakfast. I like my lady with me; still, we can go again when next moon wanes. My pet is not frightened, is she?"

"No!" she said, laughing. But her eyes were a little big. Her fingers played with his watch-chain. "I'd rather," she said presently, "you went later on and took me. All this is so odd still: the House, and that; and I love it so. And after all, it is a long way and several years too, sometimes, in the Lotus Room, even though it is all over next morning. I'd rather we went together. If anything happened then, well, we'd both be done in, and it wouldn't matter so much, would it?"

"Both be what?" said Lessingham. "I'm afraid your language is not all that might be wished."

"Well, you taught me!" said she; and they laughed.

They sat there till the shadows crept over the lawn and up the trees, and the high rocks of the mountain shoulder beyond burned red in the evening rays. He said, "If you like to stroll a bit of way up the fell-side, Mercury is visible to-night. We might get a glimpse of him just after sunset."

A little later, standing on the open hillside below the hawking bats, they watched for the dim planet that showed at last low down in the west between the sunset and the dark.

He said, "It is as if Mercury had a finger on me tonight, Mary. It's no good my trying to sleep to-night except in the Lotus Room."

Her arm tightened in his. "Mercury?" she said. "It is another world. It is too far."

But he laughed and said, "Nothing is too far."

They turned back as the shadows deepened. As they stood in the dark of the arched gate leading from the open fell into the garden, the soft clear notes of a spinet sounded from the house. She put up a finger. "Hark," she said. "Your daughter playing *Les Barricades*."

They stood listening. "She loves playing," he whispered. "I'm glad we taught her to play." Presently he whispered again, "*Les Barricades Mystérieuses*. What inspired Couperin with that enchanted name? And only you and I know what it really means. *Les Barricades Mystérieuses.*"

***

That night Lessingham lay alone in the Lotus Room. Its casements opened eastward on the sleeping woods and the sleeping bare

slopes of Illgill Head. He slept soft and deep; for that was the House of Postmeridian, and the House of Peace.

In the deep and dead time of the night, when the waning moon peered over the mountain shoulder, he woke suddenly. The silver beams shone through the open window on a form perched at the foot of the bed: a little bird, black, round-headed, short-beaked, with long sharp wings, and eyes like two stars shining. It spoke and said, "Time is."

So Lessingham got up and muffled himself in a great cloak that lay on a chair beside the bed. He said, "I am ready, my little martlet." For that was the House of Heart's Desire.

Surely the martlet's eyes filled all the room with starlight. It was an old room with lotuses carved on the panels and on the bed and chairs and roof-beams; and in the glamour the carved flowers swayed like water-lilies in a lazy stream. He went to the window, and the little martlet sat on his shoulder. A chariot coloured like the halo about the moon waited by the window, poised in air, harnessed to a strange steed. A horse it seemed, but winged like an eagle, and its fore-legs feathered and armed with eagle's claws instead of hooves. He entered the chariot, and that little martlet sat on his knee.

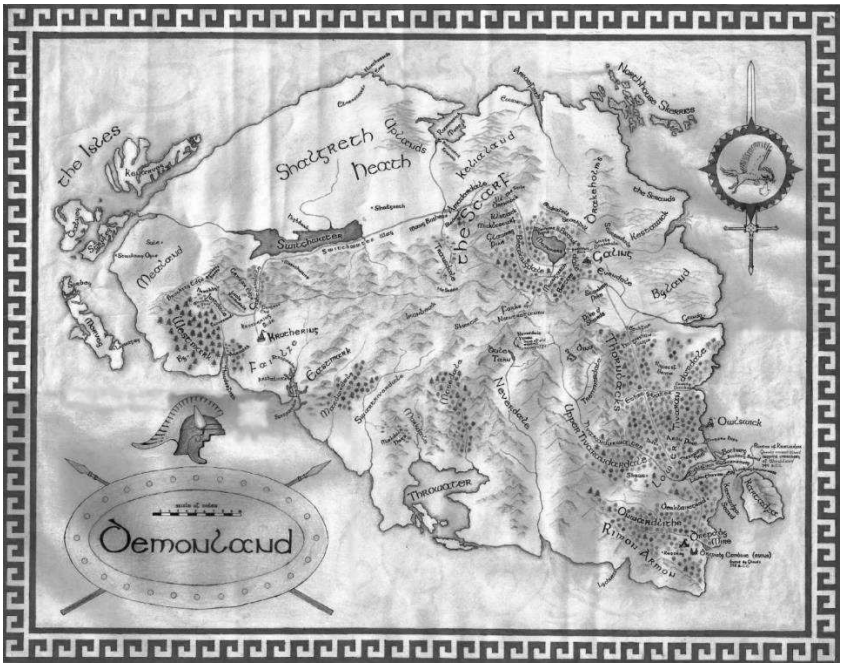
With a whirr of wings the wild courser sprang skyward. The night about them was like the tumult of bubbles about a diver's ears diving in a deep pool under a smooth steep rock in a mountain cataract. Time was swallowed up in speed; the world reeled; and it was but as the space between two deep breaths till that strange courser spread wide his rainbow wings and slanted down the night over a great island that slumbered on a slumbering sea, with lesser isles about it: a country of rock mountains and hill pastures and many waters, all a-glimmer in the moonshine.

They landed within a gate crowned with golden lions. Lessingham came down from the chariot, and the little black martlet circled about his head, showing him a yew avenue leading from the gates. As in a dream, he followed her.

Chapter 1

The Castle of Lord Juss

OF THE RARITIES THAT WERE IN THE LOFTY PRESENCE CHAMBER FAIR AND LOVELY TO BEHOLD, AND OF THE QUALITIES AND CONDITIONS OF THE LORDS OF DEMONLAND: AND OF THE EMBASSY SENT UNTO THEM BY KING GORICE XI., AND OF THE ANSWER THERETO.



THE eastern stars were paling to the dawn as Lessingham followed his conductor along the grass walk between the shadowy ranks of Irish yews, that stood like soldiers mysterious and expectant in the darkness. The grass was bathed in night-dew, and great white lilies sleeping in the shadows of the yews loaded the air of that gar-

den with fragrance. Lessingham felt no touch of the ground beneath his feet, and when he stretched out his hand to touch a tree his hand passed through branch and leaves as though they were unsubstantial as a moonbeam.

The little martlet, alighting on his shoulder, laughed in his ear. "Child of earth," she said, "dost think we are here in dreamland?"

He answered nothing, and she said, "This is no dream. Thou, first of the children of men, art come to Mercury, where thou and I will journey up and down for a season to show thee the lands and oceans, the forests, plains, and ancient mountains, cities and palaces of this world, Mercury, and the doings of them that dwell therein. But here thou canst not handle aught, neither make the folk ware of thee, not though thou shout thy throat hoarse. For thou and I walk here impalpable and invisible, as it were two dreams walking."

They were now on the marble steps which led from the yew walk to the terrace opposite the great gate of the castle. "No need to unbar gates to thee and me," said the martlet, as they passed beneath the darkness of that ancient portal, carved with strange devices, and clean through the massy timbers of the bolted gate thickly riveted with silver, into the inner court. "Go we into the lofty presence chamber and there tarry awhile. Morning is kindling the upper air, and folk will soon be stirring in the castle, for they lie not long abed when day begins in Demonland. For be it known to thee, O earthborn, that this land is Demonland, and this castle the castle of Lord Juss, and this day now dawning his birthday, when the Demons hold high festival in Juss's castle to do honour unto him and to his brethren, Spitfire and Goldry Bluszco; and these and their fathers before them bear rule from time immemorial in Demonland, and have the lordship over all the Demons."

She spoke, and the first low beams of the sun smote javelin-like through the eastern windows, and the freshness of morning breathed and shimmered in that lofty chamber, chasing the blue and dusky shades of departed night to the corners and recesses, and to the rafters of the vaulted roof. Surely no potentate of earth, not Croesus, not the great King, not Minos in his royal palace in Crete, not all the Pharaohs, not Queen Semiramis, nor all the Kings of Babylon and Nineveh had ever a throne room to compare in glory with that high presence chamber of the lords of Demonland. Its walls and pillars were of snow-white marble, every vein whereof was set with small gems: rubies, corals, garnets, and pink topaz. Seven pillars on either side bore up the shadowy vault of the roof; the roof-tree and the beams were of gold, curiously carved, the roof itself of mother-of-pearl. A side aisle ran behind each row of pillars, and seven paintings on the western side faced seven spacious windows on the east. At the end of the hall upon a dais stood three high seats, the arms of each composed of two hippogriffs wrought in gold, with wings spread, and the legs of the seats the legs of the hippogriffs; but the body of each high seat was a single jewel of monstrous size: the left-hand seat a black opal, asparkle with steel-blue fire, the next a fire-opal, as it were a burning coal, the third seat an alexandrite, purple like wine by night but deep sea-green by day. Ten more pillars stood in semicircle behind the high seats, bearing up above them and the dais a canopy of gold. The benches that ran from end to end of the lofty chamber were of cedar, inlaid with coral and ivory, and so were the tables that stood before the benches. The floor of the chamber was tessellated, of marble and green tourmaline, and on every square of tourmaline was carven the image of a fish: as the dolphin, the conger, the cat-fish, the salmon, the tunny, the squid, and other wonders of the deep. Hangings of tapestry were behind the high seats, worked with flowers, snake's-head, snapdragon, dragon-mouth, and

their kind; and on the dado below the windows were sculptures of birds and beasts and creeping things.

But a great wonder of this chamber, and a marvel to behold, was how the capital of every one of the four-and-twenty pillars was hewn from a single precious stone, carved by the hand of some sculptor of long ago into the living form of a monster: here was a harpy with screaming mouth, so wondrously cut in ochre-tinted jade it was a marvel to hear no scream from her: here in wine-yellow topaz a flying fire-drake: there a cockatrice made of a single ruby: there a star sapphire the colour of moonlight, cut for a cyclops, so that the rays of the star trembled from his single eye: salamanders, mermaids, chimaeras, wild men o' the woods, leviathans, all hewn from faultless gems, thrice the bulk of a big man's body, velvet-dark sapphires, crystolite, beryl, amethyst, and the yellow zircon that is like transparent gold.

To give light to the presence chamber were seven escarbuncles, great as pumpkins, hung in order down the length of it, and nine fair moonstones standing in order on silver pedestals between the pillars on the dais. These jewels, drinking in the sunshine by day, gave it forth during the hours of darkness in a radiance of pink light and a soft effulgence as of moonbeams. And yet another marvel, the nether side of the canopy over the high seats was encrusted with lapis lazuli, and in that feigned dome of heaven burned the twelve signs of the zodiac, every star a diamond that shone with its own light.

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Folk now began to be astir in the castle, and there came a score of serving men into the presence chamber with brooms and brushes, cloths and leathers, to sweep and garnish it, and burnish the gold and jewels of the chamber. Lissome they were and sprightly of gait, of fresh complexion and fair-haired. Horns grew on their heads. When

their tasks were accomplished they departed, and the presence began to fill with guests. A joy it was to see such a shifting maze of velvets, furs, curious needleworks and cloth of tissue, tiffanies, laces, ruffs, goodly chains and carcanets of gold: such glitter of jewels and weapons: such nodding of the plumes the Demons wore in their hair, half veiling the horns that grew upon their heads. Some were sitting on the benches or leaning on the polished tables, some walking forth and back upon the shining floor. Here and there were women among them, women so fair one had said: it is surely white-armed Helen this one; this, Arcadian Atalanta; this, Phryne that stood to Praxiteles for Aphrodite's picture; this, Thaïs, for whom great Alexander to pleasure her fantasy did burn Persepolis like a candle; this, she that was rapt by the Dark God from the flowering fields of Enna, to be Queen for ever among the dead that be departed. Now came a stir near the stately doorway, and Lessingham beheld a Demon of burly frame and noble port, richly attired. His face was ruddy and somewhat freckled, his forehead wide, his eyes calm and blue like the sea. His beard, thick and tawny, was parted and brushed back and upwards on either side.

"Tell me, my little martlet," said Lessingham, "is this Lord Juss?"

"This is not Lord Juss," answered the martlet, "nor aught so worshipful as he. The lord thou seest is Volle, who dwelleth under Kartadza, by the salt sea. A great sea-captain is he, and one that did service to the cause of Demonland, and of the whole world besides, in the late wars against the Ghouls.

"But cast thine eyes again towards the door, where one standeth amid a knot of friends, tall and somewhat stooping, in a corselet of silver, and a cloak of old brocaded silk coloured like tarnished gold; something like to Volle in feature, but swarthy, and with bristling black moustachios."

"I see him," said Lessingham. "This then is Lord Juss!"

"Not so," said martlet. "'Tis but Vizz, brother to Volle. He is wealthiest in goods of all the Demons, save the three brethren only and Lord Brandoch Daha."

"And who is this?" asked Lessingham, pointing to one of light and brisk step and humorous eye, who in that moment met Volle and engaged him in converse apart. Handsome of face he was, albeit somewhat long-nosed and sharp-nosed: keen and hard and filled with life and the joy of it.

"Here thou beholdest," answered she, "Lord Zigg, the far-famed tamer of horses. Well loved is he among the Demons, for he is merry of mood, and a mighty man of his hands withal when he leadeth his horsemen against the enemy."

Volle threw up his beard and laughed a great laugh at some jest that Zigg whispered in his ear, and Lessingham leaned forward into the hall if haply he might catch what was said. The hum of talk drowned the words, but leaning forward Lessingham saw where the arras curtains behind the dais parted for a moment, and one of princely bearing advanced past the high seats down the body of the hall. His gait was delicate, as of some lithe beast of prey newly wakened out of slumber, and he greeted with lazy grace the many friends who hailed his entrance. Very tall was that lord, and slender of build, like a girl. His tunic was of silk coloured like the wild rose, and embroidered in gold with representations of flowers and thunderbolts. Jewels glittered on his left hand and on the golden bracelets on his arms, and on the fillet twined among the golden curls of his hair, set with plumes of the king-bird of Paradise. His horns were dyed with saffron, and inlaid with filigree work of gold. His buskins were laced with gold, and from his belt hung a sword, narrow of blade and keen, the hilt rough with beryls and black diamonds. Strangely light and

delicate was his frame and seeming, yet with a sense of slumbering power beneath, as the delicate peak of a snow mountain seen afar in the low red rays of morning. His face was beautiful to look upon, and softly coloured like a girl's face, and his expression one of gentle melancholy, mixed with some disdain; but fiery glints awoke at intervals in his eyes, and the lines of swift determination hovered round the mouth below his curled moustachios.

"At last," murmured Lessingham, "at last, Lord Juss!" "Little art thou to blame," said the martlet, "for this misprision, for scarce could a lordlier sight have joyed thine eyes. Yet is this not Juss, but Lord Brandoch Daha, to whom all Demonland west of Shalgreth and Stropardon oweth allegiance: the rich vineyards of Krothering, the broad pasture lands of Failze, and all the western islands and their cragbound fastnesses. Think not, because he affecteth silks and jewels like a queen, and carrieth himself light and dainty as a silver birch tree on the mountain, that his hand is light or his courage doubtful in war. For years was he held for the third best man-at-arms in all Mercury, along with these, Goldry Bluszco and Gorice X. of Witchland. And Gorice he slew, nine summers back, in single combat, when the Witches harried in Goblinland and Brandoch Daha led five hundred and fourscore Demons to succour Gaslark, the king of that country. And now can none surpass Lord Brandoch Daha in feats of arms, save perchance Goldry alone.

"Yet, lo," she said, as a sweet and wild music stole on the ear, and the guests turned towards the dais, and the hangings parted, "at last, the triple lordship of Demonland! Strike softly, music: smile, Fates, on this festal day! Joy and safe days shine for this world and Demonland! Turn thy gaze first on him who walks in majesty in the midst, his tunic of olive-green velvet ornamented with devices of hidden meaning in thread of gold and beads of chrysolite. Mark how the buskins, clasping his stalwart calves, glitter with gold and amber.

Mark the dusky cloak streamed with gold and lined with blood-red silk: a charmed cloak, made by the sylphs in forgotten days, bringing good hap to the wearer, so he be true of heart and no dastard. Mark him that weareth it, his sweet dark countenance, the violet fire in his eyes, the sombre warmth of his smile, like autumn woods in late sunshine. This is Lord Juss, lord of this age-remembering castle, than whom none hath more worship in wide Demonland. Somewhat he knoweth of art magical, yet useth not that art; for it sappeth the life and strength, nor is it held worthy that a Demon should put trust in that art, but rather in his own might and main.

"Now turn thine eyes to him that leaneth on Juss's left arm, shorter but mayhap sturdier than he, apparelled in black silk that shimmers with gold as he moveth, and crowned with black eagle's feathers among his horns and yellow hair. His face is wild and keen like a sea-eagle's, and from his bristling brows the eyes dart glances sharp as a glancing spear. A faint flame, pallid like the fire of a Will-o'-the-Wisp, breathes ever and anon from his distended nostrils. This is Lord Spitfire, impetuous in war. "Last, behold on Juss's right hand, yon lord that bulks mighty as Hercules yet steppeth lightly as a heifer. The thews and sinews of his great limbs ripple as he moves beneath a skin whiter than ivory; his cloak of cloth of gold is heavy with jewels, his tunic of black sendaline hath great hearts worked thereon in rubies and red silk thread. Slung from his shoulders clanks a two-handed sword, the pommel a huge star-ruby carven in the image of a heart, for the heart is his sign and symbol. This is that sword forged by the elves, wherewith he slew the sea-monster, as thou mayest see in the painting on the wall. Noble is he of countenance, most like to his brother Juss, but darker brown of hair and ruddier of hue and bigger of cheekbone. Look well on him, for never shall thine eyes behold a greater champion than the Lord Goldry Bluszco, captain of the hosts of Demonland."

Now when the greetings were done and the strains of the lutes and recorders sighed and lost themselves in the shadowy vault of the roof, the cup-bearers did fill great gems made in form of cups with ancient wine, and the Demons caroused to Lord Juss deep draughts in honour of this day of his nativity. And now they were ready to set forth by twos and threes into the parks and pleasaunces, some to take their pleasure about the fair gardens and fishponds, some to hunt wild game among the wooded hills, some to disport themselves at quoits or tennis or riding at the ring or martial exercises; that so they might spend the livelong day as befitteth high holiday, in pleasure and action without care, and thereafter revel in the lofty presence chamber till night grew old with eating and drinking and all delight.

But as they were upon going forth, a trumpet was sounded without, three strident blasts.

"What kill-joy have we here?" said Spitfire. "The trumpet soundeth only for travellers from the outlands. I feel it in my bones some rascal is come to Galing, one that bringeth ill hap in his pocket and a shadow athwart the sun on this our day of festival." "Speak no word of ill omen," answered Juss. "Whosoe'er it be, we will straight dispatch his business and so fall to pleasure indeed. Some, run to the gate and bring him in."

The serving man hastened and returned, saying, "Lord, it is an Ambassador from Witchland and his train. Their ship made land at Lookinghaven-ness at nightfall. They slept on board, and your soldiers gave them escort to Galing at break of day. He craveth present audience."

"From Witchland, ha?" said Juss. "Such smokes use ever to go before the fire."

"Shall's bid the fellow," said Spitfire, "wait on our pleasure? It is pity such should poison our gladness."

Goldry laughed and said, "Whom hath he sent us? Laxus, think you? to make his peace with us again for that vile part of his practised against us off Kartadza, detestably falsifying his word he had given us?"

Juss said to the serving man, "Thou sawest the Ambassador. Who is he?"

"Lord," answered he, "His face was strange to me. He is little of stature and, by your highness' leave, the most unlike to a great lord of Witchland that ever I saw. And, by your leave, for all the marvellous rich and sumptuous coat a weareth, he is very like a false jewel in a rich casing."

"Well," said Juss, "a sour draught sweetens not in the waiting. Call we in the Ambassador."

Lord Juss sat in the high seat midmost of the dais, with Goldry on his right in the seat of black opal, and on his left Spitfire, throned on the alexandrite. On the dais sat likewise those other lords of Demonland, and the guests of lower degree thronged the benches and the polished tables as the wide doors opened on their silver hinges, and the Ambassador with pomp and ceremony paced up the shining floor of marble and green tourmaline.

"Why, what a beastly fellow is this?" said Lord Goldry in his brother's ear. "His hairy hands reach down to his knees. A shuffleth in his walk like a hobbled jackass."

"I like not the dirty face of the Ambassador," said Lord Zigg. "His nose sitteth flat on the face of him as it were a dab of clay, and I can see pat up his nostrils a summer day's journey into his head. If's upper lip bespeak him not a rare spouter of rank fustian, perdition

catch me. Were it a finger's breadth longer, a might tuck it into his collar to keep his chin warm of a winter's night."

"I like not the smell of the Ambassador," said Lord Brandoch Daha. And he called for censers and sprinklers of lavender and rose water to purify the chamber, and let open the crystal windows that the breezes of heaven might enter and make all sweet.

So the Ambassador walked up the shining floor and stood before the lords of Demonland that sat upon the high seats between the golden hippogriffs. He was robed in a long mantle of scarlet lined with ermine, with crabs, woodlice, and centipedes worked thereon in golden thread. His head was covered with a black velvet cap with a peacock's feather fastened with a brooch of silver. Supported by his trainbearers and attendants, and leaning on his golden staff, he with raucous accent delivered his mission:

"Juss, Goldry, and Spitfire, and ye other Demons, I come before you as the Ambassador of Gorice XI., most glorious King of Witchland, Lord and great Duke of Buteny and Estremerine, Commander of Shulan, Thramnë, Mingos, and Permio, and High Warden of the Esamocian Marches, Great Duke of Trace, King Paramount of Beshtria and Nevria and Prince of Ar, Great Lord over the country of Ojedia, Maltraëny, and of Baltary and Toribia, and Lord of many other countries, most glorious and most great, whose power and glory is over all the world and whose name shall endure for all generations. And first I bid you be bound by that reverence for my sacred office of envoy from the King, which is accorded by all people and potentates, save such as be utterly barbarous, to ambassadors and envoys."

"Speak and fear not," answered Juss. "Thou hast mine oath. And that hath never been forsworn, to Witch or other barbarian."

The Ambassador shot out his lips in an O, and threatened with his head; then grinned, laying bare his sharp and misshapen teeth, and proceeded:

"Thus saith King Gorice, great and glorious, and he chargeth me to deliver it to you, neither adding any word nor taking away: 'I have it in mind that no ceremony of homage or fealty hath been performed before me by the dwellers in my province of Demonland———'"

As the rustling of dry leaves strewn in a flagged court when a sudden wind striketh them, there went a stir among the guests. Nor might the Lord Spitfire contain his wrath, but springing up and clapping hand to sword-hilt, as minded to do a hurt to the Ambassador, "Province?" he cried. "Are not the Demons a free people? And is it to be endured that Witchland should commission this slave to cast insults in our teeth, and this in our own castle?"

A murmur went about the hall, and here and there folk rose from their seats. The Ambassador drew down his head between his shoulders like a tortoise, baring his teeth and blinking with his small eyes. But Lord Brandoch Daha, lightly laying his hand on Spitfire's arm, said: "The Ambassador hath not ended his message, cousin, and thou hast frightened him. Have patience and spoil not the comedy. We shall not lack words to answer King Gorice: no, nor swords, if he must have them. But it shall not be said of us of Demonland that it needeth but a boorish message to turn us from our ancient courtesy toward ambassadors and heralds."

So spake Lord Brandoch Daha, in lazy half-mocking tone, as one who but idly returneth the ball of conversation; yet clearly, so that all might hear. And therewith the murmurs died down, and Spitfire said, 'I am tame. Say thine errand freely, and imagine not that we shall hold thee answerable for aught thou sayest, but him that sent thee."

"Whose humble mouthpiece I only am," said the Ambassador, somewhat gathering courage; "and who, saving your reverence, lacketh not the will nor the power to take revenge for any outrage done upon his servants. Thus saith the King: 'I therefore summon and command you, Juss, Spitfire, and Goldry Bluszco, to make haste and come to me in Witchland in my fortress of Carcë, and there dutifully kiss my toe, in witness before all the world that I am your Lord and King, and rightful overlord of all Demonland.'"

Gravely and without gesture Lord Juss harkened to the Ambassador, leaning back in his high seat with either arm thrown athwart the arched neck of the hippogriff. Goldry, smiling scornfully, toyed with the hilt of his great sword. Spitfire sat strained and glowering, the sparks crackling at his nostrils.

"Thou hast delivered all?" said Juss.

"All," answered the Ambassador.

"Thou shalt have thine answer," said Juss. "While we take rede thereon, eat and drink"; and he beckoned the cupbearer to pour out bright wine for the Ambassador. But the Ambassador excused himself, saying that he was not athirst, and that he had store of food and wine aboard of his ship, which should suffice his needs and those of his following.

Then said Lord Spitfire, "No marvel though the spawn of Witchland fear venom in the cup. They who work commonly such villany against their enemies, as witness Recedor of Goblinland whom Corsus murthered with a poisonous draught, shake still in the knees lest themselves be so entertained to their destruction;" and snatching the cup he quaffed it to the dregs, and dashed it on the marble floor before the Ambassador, so that it was shivered into pieces.

And the lords of Demonland rose up and withdrew behind the flowery hangings into a chamber apart, to determine of their answer to the message sent unto them by King Gorice of Witchland.

When they were private together, Spitfire spake and said, "Is it to be borne that the King should put such shame and mockery upon us? Could a not at the least have made a son of Corund or of Corsus his Ambassador to bring us his defiance, 'stead of this filthiest of his domestics, a gibbering dwarf fit only to make them gab and game at their tippling bouts when they be three parts senseless with boosing?"

Lord Juss smiled somewhat scornfully. "With wisdom," he said, "and with foresight hath Witchland made choice of his time to move against us, knowing that thirty and three of our well-built ships are sunken in Kartadza Sound in the battle with the Ghouls, and but fourteen remain to us. Now that the Ghouls are slain, every soul, and utterly abolished from this world, and so the great curse and peril of all this world ended by the sword and great valour of Demonland alone, now seemeth the happy moment unto these late mouth-friends to fall upon us. For have not the Witches a strong fleet of ships, since their whole fleet fled at the beginning of their fight with us against the Ghouls, leaving us to bear the burden? And now are they minded for this new treason, to set upon us traitorously and suddenly in this disadvantage. For the King well judgeth we can carry no army to Witchland nor do aught in his despite, but must be long months a-shipbuilding. And doubt not he holdeth an armament ready aboard at Tenemos to sad hither if he get the answer he knoweth we shall send him."

"Sit we at ease then," said Goldry, "sharpening our swords; and let him ship his armies across the salt sea. Not a Witch shall land in

Demonland but shall leave here his blood and bones to make fat our cornfields and our vineyards."

"Rather," said Spitfire, "apprehend this rascal, and put to sea to-day with the fourteen ships left us. We can surprise Witchland in his strong place of Carcë, sack it, and give him to the crows to peck at, or ever he is well awake to the swiftness of our answer. That is my counsel."

"Nay." said Juss, "We shall not take him sleeping. Be certain that his ships are ready and watching in the Witchland seas, prepared against any rash onset. It were folly to set our neck in the noose; and little glory to Demonland to await his coming. This, then, is my rede: I will bid Gorice to the duello, and make offer to him to let lie on the fortune thereof the decision of this quarrel."

"A good rede, if it might be fulfilled," said Goldry. "But never will he dare to stand with weapons in single combat 'gainst thee or 'gainst any of us. Nevertheless the thing shall be brought about. Is not Gorice a mighty wrastler, and hath he not in his palace in Carcë the skulls and bones of ninety and nine great champions whom he hath vanquished and slain in that exercise? Puffed up beyond measure is he in his own conceit, and folk say it is a grief to him that none hath been found this long while that durst wrastle with him, and wofully he pineth for the hundredth. He shall wrastle a fall with me!"

Now this seemed good to them all. So when they had talked on it awhile and concluded what they would do, glad of heart the lords of Demonland turned them back to the lofty presence chamber. And there Lord Juss spake and said: "Demons, ye have heard the words which the King of Witchland in the Overweening pride and shamelessness of his heart hath spoken unto us by the mouth of this Ambassador. Now this is our answer which my brother shall give, the

Lord Goldry Bluszco; and we charge thee, O Ambassador, to deliver it truly, neither adding any word nor taking away."

And the Lord Goldry spake: "We, the lords of Demonland, do utterly scorn thee, Gorice XI., for the greatest of dastards, in that thou basely fleddest and forsookest us, thy sworn confederates, in the sea battle against the Ghouls. Our swords, which in that battle ended so great a curse and peril to all this world, are not bent nor broken. They shall be sheathed in the bowels of thee and thy minions, Corsus to wit, and Corund, and their sons, and Corinius, and what other evildoers harbour in waterish Witchland, sooner than one little sea-pink growing on the cliffs of Demonland shall do thee obeisance. But, that thou mayest, if so thou wilt, feel our power somewhat, I, Lord Goldry Bluszco, make thee this offer: that thou and I do match ourselves singly each against other to wrastle three falls at the court of the Red Foliot, who inclineth neither to our side nor to thine in this quarrel. And we will bind ourselves by mighty oaths to these conditions, that if I overcome thee, the Demons shall leave you of Witchland in peace, and ye them, and the Witches shall forswear for ever their impudent claims on Demonland. But if thou, Gorice, win the day, then hast thou the glory of that victory, and withal full liberty to thrust thy claims upon us with the sword."

So spake the Lord Goldry Bluszco, standing in great pride and splendour beneath the starry canopy, and scowling terribly on the Ambassador from Witchland, so that the Ambassador was abashed and his knees smote together. And Goldry called his scribe and made him write the message for Gorice the King in great characters on a roll of parchment, and the lords of Demonland sealed it with their seals, and gave it to the Ambassador.

The Ambassador took it and made haste to depart; but when he was come to the stately doorway of the presence chamber, being

near the door and amongst his attendants, and away from the lords of Demonland, he plucked up heart a little and turned and said: "Rashly and to thy certain undoing, O Goldry Bluszco, hast thou bidden our Lord the King to contend with thee in wrastling. For be thou never so mighty of limb, yet hath he overthrown as mighty. And he wrastleth not for sport, but will surely work thy life's decay, and keep the dead bones of thee with the bones of the ninety and nine champions whom he hath heretofore laid low in that exercise.

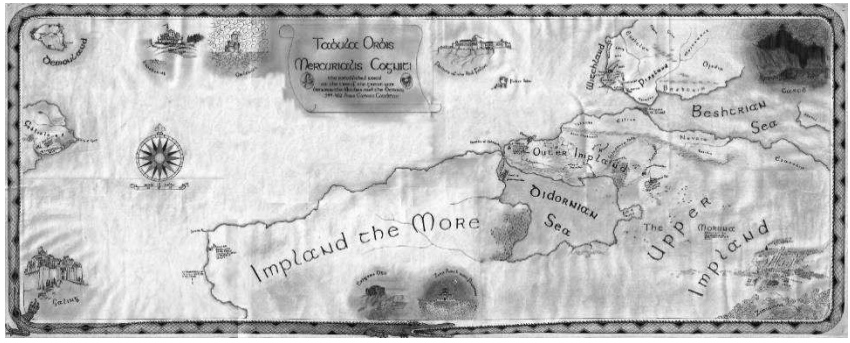
Therewith, because Goldry and the other lords scowled upon him terribly, and the guests near the door fell to hooting and reviling of the Witches, the Ambassador went forth hastily and hastily down the shining stairs and across the court, as one who fleeth along a lane on a dark and windy night, daring not to turn his head lest his eye behold some fearsome thing prepared to clasp him. So speeding, he was fain to catch up about his knees the folds of his velvet cloak richly worked with crabs and creeping things; and huge whooping and laughter went up among the common lag of people without, to behold his long and nerveless tail thus bared to their unfriendly gaze. Insomuch that they fell to shouting with one accord, "Though his mouth be foul he hath a fair tail! Saw ye not his tail? Hurrah for Gorice who hath sent us a monkey for his Ambassador!"

And with jibe and unmannerly yell the crowd hung lovingly upon the Ambassador and his train all the way down from Galing castle to the quays. So that it was like a sweet homecoming to him to come on board his well-built ship and have her rowed amain out of Lookinghaven. So when they had rounded Lookinghaven-ness and were free of the land, they hoisted sail and voyaged before a favouring breeze eastward over the teeming deep to Witchland.

Chapter 2

The Wrastling for Demonland

OF THE PROGNOSTICKS WHICH TROUBLED LORD GRO CONCERNING THE MEETING BETWEEN THE KING OF WITCHLAND AND THE LORD GOLDRY BLUSZCO; AND HOW THEY MET, AND OF THE ISSUE OF THAT WRASTLING.



"How could I have fallen asleep?" cried Lessingham. "Where is the castle of the Demons, and how did we leave the great presence chamber where they saw the Ambassador?" For he stood on rolling uplands that leaned to the sea, treeless on every side as far as the eye might reach; and on three sides shimmered the sea, kissed by the sun and roughened by the salt glad wind that charged over the downs, charioting clouds without number through the illimitable heights of air.

The little black martlet answered him, "My hippogriff travelleth as well in time as in space. Days and weeks have been left behind by us, in what seemeth to thee but the twinkling of an eye, and thou standest in the Foliot Isles, a land happy under the mild regiment of a

peaceful prince, on the day appointed by King Gorice to wrastle with Lord Goldry Bluszco. Terrible must be the wrastling betwixt two such champions, and dark the issue thereof. And my heart is afraid for Goldry Bluszco, big and strong though he be and unconquered in war; for there hath not arisen in all the ages such a wrastler as this Gorice, and strong he is, and hard and unwearying, and skilled in every art of attack and defence, and subtle withal, and cruel and fell like a serpent."

Where they stood the down was cut by a combe that descended to the sea, and overhanging the combe was the palace of the Red Foliot, rambling and low, with many little towers and battlements, built of stones hewn from the wall of the combe, so that it was hard from a distance to discern what was palace and what native rock. Behind the palace stretched a meadow, flat and smooth, carpeted with the close wiry turf of the downs. At either end of the meadow were booths set up, to the north the booths of them of Witchland, and to the south the booths of the Demons. In the midst of the meadow was a space marked out with withies sixty paces either way for the wrastling ground.

Only the birds of the air and the sea-wind were abroad as then, save those that walked armed before the Witches' booths, six in company, harnessed as for battle in byrnies of shining bronze, with greaves and shields of bronze and helms that glanced in the sun. Five were proper slender youths, the eldest of whom had not yet beard full grown, black-browed and great of jaw; the sixth, huge as a neat, topped them by half a head. Age had flecked with gray the beard that spread over his big chest to his belt stiffened with studs of iron, but the vigour of youth was in his glance and in his voice, and in the tread of his foot, and in his fist so lightly handling his burly spear.

"Behold, wonder, and lament," said the martlet, "that the innocent eye of day should be enforced still to look upon the children of night everlasting. Corund of Witchland and his cursed sons."

Lessingham thought, "A most fiery politician is my little martlet: damned fiends and angels and nothing betwixt for her. But I'll dance to none of their tunes, but wait for these things' unfolding."

So walked those back and forth as caged lions before the Witches' booths, until Corund halted and leaning on his spear said to one of his sons, "Go in and seek out Gro that I may speak with him." And the son of Corund went, and returned anon with Lord Gro, that came with furtive step yet goodly and fair to behold. The nose of him was hooked like a sickle and his eyes great and fair like the eyes of an ox, inscrutable as they. Lean and spare was his frame. Pale was his face and pale his delicate hands, and his long black beard was tightly curled and bright as the coat of a black retriever.

Corund said, "How is it with the King?"

Gro answered him, "He chafeth to be at it; and to pass away the time he playeth at dice with Corinius, and the luck goeth against the King."

"What makest thou of that?" asked Corund.

And Gro said, "The fortune of the dice jumpeth not commonly with the fortune of war."

Corund grunted in his beard, and laying his large hand on Lord Gro's shoulder, "Speak to me a little apart," he said; and when they were private, "Darken not counsel," said Corund, "to me and my sons. Have I not these four years past been as a brother unto thee, and wilt thou still be secret toward us?"

But Gro smiled a sad smile and said, "Why should we by words of ill omen strike yet another blow where the tree tottereth?"

Corund groaned. "Omens," said he, "increase upon us from that time forth when the King accepted the challenge, evilly, and flatly against thy counsel and mine and the counsel of all the great ones in the land. Surely the Gods have made him fey, having ordained his destruction and our humbling before these Demons." And he said, "Omens thicken upon us, O Gro. First, the night raven that went widdershins round about the palace of Carcë, that night when the King accepted this challenge, and we were all drunken with wine after our great feasting and surfeiting in his halls. Next, the stumbling of the King whenas he went upon the poop of the long ship which bare us on this voyage to these islands. Next, the squint-eyed cup-bearer that poured out unto us yesternight. And throughout, the devilish pride and bragging humour of the King. No more: he is fey. And the dice fall against him."

Gro spake and said, "O Corund, I will not hide it from thee that my heart is heavy as thy heart under shadow of ill to be. For as I lay sleeping betwixt the strokes of night, a dream of the night stood by my bed and beheld me with a glance so fell that I was all adrad and quaking with fear. And it seemed to me that the dream smote the roof above my bed, and the roof opened and disclosed the outer dark, and in the dark travelled a bearded star, and the night was quick with fiery signs. And blood was on the roof, and great gouts of blood on the walls and on the cornice of my bed. And the dream screeched like the screech-owl, and cried, *Witchland from thy hand, O King!* And methought the whole world was lighted in a lowe, and with a great cry I awoke out of the dream."

"Thou art wise," said Corund; "and belike the dream was a true dream, sent thee through the gate of horn, and belike it forebodeth events great and evil for the King and for Witchland."

Gro said, "Disclose it not to the others, for none can strive with Fate and gain the victory, and it would but cast down their hearts. But it is fitting we be ready against evil hap. If (which yet may the Gods forfend) ill come of this wrastling bout, fail not every one of you ere you act on any enterprise to take counsel of me. 'Bare is back without brother behind it.' Together must we do that we do."

"Thou hast my firm assurance on't," said Corund.

Now began a great company to come forth from the palace and take their stand on, either side of the wrastling ground. The Red Foliot sate in his car of polished ebony, drawn by six black horses with flowing manes and tails; before him went his musicians, pipers and minstrels doing their craft, and behind him fifty spearmen, weighed down with armour and ponderous shields that covered them from chin to toe. Their armour was stained with madder, in such wise that they seemed bathed in blood. Mild to look on was the Red Foliot, yet kingly. His skin was scarlet like the head of the green woodpecker. He wore a diadem of silver and robes of scarlet trimmed with black fur.

So when the Foliots were assembled, one stood forth with a horn at the command of the Red Foliot and blew three blasts. Therewith came forth from their booths the lords of Demonland and their men-at-arms, Juss, Goldry, Spitfire, and Brandoch Daha, all armed as for battle save Goldry, who was muffled in a cloak of cloth of gold with great hearts worked thereon in red silk thread. And from their booths in turn came the lords of Witchland all armed, and their fighting men, and little love there was in the glances they and the Demons cast upon each other. In the midst stalked the King, his great limbs muffled, like Goldry's, in a cloak: and it was of black silk lined with black bearskin, and ornamented with crabs worked in diamonds. The crown of Witchland, fashioned like a hideous crab and encrusted

with jewels so thickly that none might discern the iron whereof it was framed, weighed on his beetling brow. His beard was black and bristly, spade-shaped and thick: his hair close cropped. His upper lip was shaved, displaying his sneering mouth, and from the darkness below his eyebrows looked forth eyes that showed a green light, like those of a wolf. Corund walked at the King's left elbow, his giant frame an inch less in stature than the King. Corinius went on the right, wearing a rich cloak of sky-blue tissue over his shining armour. Tall and soldier-like was Corinius, and young and goodly to look upon, with swaggering gait and insolent eye, thick-lipped withal and somewhat heavy of feature, and the sun shone brightly on his shaven jowl.

Now the Red Foliot let sound the horn again, and standing in his ebony car he read out the conditions, as thus: "O Gorice XI., most glorious King of Witchland, and O Lord Goldry Bluszco, captain of the hosts of Demonland, it is compact betwixt you, and made fast by mighty oaths whereof I, the Red Foliot, am keeper, that ye shall wrastle three falls together on these conditions, namely, that if Gorice the King be victorious, then hath he that glory and withal full liberty to enforce with the sword his claims of lordship over many-mountained Demonland: but if victory fall to the Lord Goldry Bluszco, then shall the Demons let the Witches abide in peace, and they them, and the Witches shall forswear for ever their claims of lordship over the Demons. And you, O King, and you, O Goldry Bluszco, are likewise bound by oath to wrastle fairly and to abide by the ruling of me, the Red Foliot, whom ye are content to choose as your umpire. And I do swear to judge justly between you. And the laws of your wrastling are that neither shall strangle his adversary with his hands, nor bite him, nor claw nor scratch his flesh, nor poach out his eyes, nor smite him with his fists, nor do any other unfair thing against him, but in all other respects ye shall wrastle freely

together. And he that shall be brought to earth with hip or shoulder shall be accounted fallen."

The Red Foliot said, "Have I spoken well, O King, and do you swear to these conditions?"

The King said, "I swear."

The Red Foliot asked in like manner, "Dost thou swear to these conditions, O Lord Goldry Bluszco?"

And Goldry answered him, "I swear."

Without more ado the King stepped into the wrastling ground on his side, and Goldry Bluszco on his, and they cast aside their rich mantles and stood forth naked for the wrastling. And folk stood silent for admiration of the thews and sinews of those twain, doubting which were mightier of build and likelier to gain the victory. The King stood taller by a little, and was longer in the arm than Goldry. But the great frame of Goldry showed excellent proportions, each part wedded to each as in the body of a God, and if either were brawnier of chest it was he, and he was thicker of neck than the King.

Now the King mocked Goldry, saying, "Rebellious hound, it is fit that I make demonstration unto thee, and unto these Foliots and Demons that witness our meeting, that I am thy King and Lord not by virtue only of this my crown of Witchland, which I thus put by for an hour, but even by the power of my body over thine and by my might and main. Be satisfied that I will not have done with thee until I have taken away thy life, and sent thy soul squealing bodiless into the unknown. And thy skull and thy marrow-bones will I have away to Carcë, to my palace, to be a token unto all the world that I have been the bane of an hundredth great champion by my wrastling, and thou not least among them that I have slain in that exercise. Thereaf-

ter, when I have eaten and drunken and made merry in my royal palace at Carcë, I will sail with my armies over the teeming deep to many-mountained Demonland. And it shall be my footstool, and these other Demons the slaves of me, yea, and the slaves of my slaves."

But the Lord Goldry Bluszco laughed lightly and said to the Red Foliot, "O Red Foliot, I am not come hither to contend with the King of Witchland in windy railing, but to match my strength against his, sinew against sinew."

Now they stood ready, and the Red Foliot made a sign with his hand, and the cymbals clashed for the first bout.

At the clash the two champions advanced and clasped one another with their strong arms, each with his right arm below and left arm above the other's shoulder, until the flesh shrank beneath the might of their arms that were as brazen bands. They swayed a little this way and that, as great trees swaying in a storm, their legs planted firmly so that they seemed to grow out of the ground like the trunks of oak trees. Nor did either yield ground to other, nor might either win a master hold upon his enemy. So swayed they back and forth for a long time, breathing heavily. And now Goldry, gathering his strength, gat the King lifted a little from the ground, and was minded to swing him round and so dash him to earth. But the King, in that moment when he found himself lifted, leaned forward mightily and smote his heel swiftly round Goldry's leg on the outside, striking him behind and a little above the ankle, in such wise that Goldry was fain to loosen his hold on the King; and greatly folk marvelled that he was able in that plight to save himself from being thrown backward by the King. So they gripped again until red wheals rose on their backs and shoulders by reason of the grievous clasping of their arms. And the King on a sudden twisted his body si-

deways, with his left side turned from Goldry; and catching with his leg Goldry's leg on the inside below the great muscle of the calf, and hugging him yet closer, he lurched mightily against him, striving to pull Goldry backward and so f all upon him and crush him as they fell to earth. But Goldry leaned violently forward, ever tightening his hold on the King, and so violently bare he forward in his strength that the King was baulked of his design; and clutched together they fell both to earth side by side with a heavy crash, and lay bemused while one might count half a score.

The Red Foliot proclaimed them even in this bout, and each returned to his fellows to take breath and rest for a space.

Now while they rested, a flittermouse flew forth from the Witchland booths and went widdershins round the wrastling ground and so returned silently whence she came. Lord Gro saw her, and his heart waxed heavy within him. He spake to Corund and said, "Needs must that I make trial even at this late hour if there be not any means to turn. the King from further adventuring of himself, ere all be lost."

Corund said, "Be it as thou wilt, but it will be in vain."

So Gro stood by the King and said, "Lord, give over this wrastling. Great of growth and mightier of limb than any that you did overcome aforetime is this Demon, yet have you vanquished him. For you did throw him, as we plainly saw, and wrongfully hath the Red Foliot adjudged you evenly matched because in the throwing of him your majesty's self did fall to earth. Tempt not the fates by another bout. Yours is the victory in this wrastling: and now we, your servants, wait but your nod to make a sudden onslaught on these Demons and slay them, as we may lightly overcome them taken at unawares. And for the Foliots, they be peaceful and sheep-like folk, and will be held in awe when we have smitten the Demons with the edge of the sword. So may you depart, O King, with pleasure and

great honour, and afterward fare to Demonland and bring it into subjection."

The King looked sourly upon Lord Gro, and said, "Thy counsel is unacceptable and unseasonable. What lieth behind it?"

Gro answered, "There have been omens, O King."

And the King said, "What omens?"

Gro answered and said, "I will not hide it from you, O my Lord the King, that in my sleep about the darkest hour a dream of the night came to my bed and beheld me with a glance so fell that the hairs of my head stood up and pale terror gat hold upon me. And methought the dream smote up the roof above my bed, and the roof yawned to the naked air of the midnight, that laboured with fiery signs, and a bearded star travelling in the houseless dark. And I beheld the roof and the walls one gore of blood. And the dream screeched like the screech-owl, crying, *Witchland from thy hand, O King!* And therewith the whole world seemed lighted in one flame, and with a shout I awoke sweating from the dream."

But the King rolled his eyes in anger upon Lord Gro and said "Well am I served and faithfully by such false scheming foxes as thou. It ill fits your turn that I should carry this deed to the end with mine own hand only, and in the blindness of your impudent folly ye come to me with tales made for scaring of babes, praying me gently to forgo my glory that thou and thy fellows may make yourselves big in the world's eyes by deeds of arms."

Gro said, "Lord, it is not so."

But the King would not hear him, but said, "Methinks it is for loyal subjects to seek greatness in the greatness of their King, nor desire to shine of their own brightness. As for this Demon, when thou sayest that I have overcome him thou speakest a gross and impudent

lie. In this bout I did but measure myself with him. But thereby know I of a surety that when I put forth my might he will not be able to withstand me; and all ye shall shortly behold how, as one shattereth a stalk of angelica, I will break and shatter the limbs of this Goldry Bluszco. As for thee, false friend, subtle fox, unfaithful servant, this long time am I grown weary of thee slinking up and down my palace devising darkly things I know not: thou, that art nought akin to Witchland, but an outlander, a Goblin exile, a serpent warmed in my bosom to my hurt. But these things shall have an end. When I have put down this Goldry Bluszco, then shall I have leisure to put down thee also."

And Gro bowed in sorrow of heart before the anger of the King, and held his peace.

Now was the horn blown for the second bout, and they stepped into the wrastling ground. At the clashing of the cymbals the King sprang at Goldry as the panther springeth, and with the rush bare him backward and well nigh forth of the wrastling ground. But when they were carried almost among the Demons where they stood to behold the contest, Goldry swung to the left and strove as before to get the King lifted off his feet; but the King foiled him and bent his ponderous weight upon him, so that Goldry's spine was like to have been crushed beneath the murthering violence of the King's arms. Then did the Lord Goldry Bluszco show forth his great power as a wrastler, for, even under the murthering clasp of the King, he by the might that was in the muscles of his brawny chest shook the King first to the right and then to the left; and the King's hold was loosened, and all his skill and mastery but narrowly saved him from a grievous fall. Nor did Goldry delay nor ponder how next to make trial of the King, but sudden as the lightning he slackened his hold and turned, and with his back under the King's belly gave a mighty lift; and they that witnessed it stood amazed in expectancy to see the King thrown over

Goldry's head. Yet for all his striving might not Goldry get the King lifted clean off the ground. Twice and three times he strove, and at each trial he seemed further from his aim, and the King bettered his hold. And at the fourth essay that Goldry made to lift the King over his back and fling him headlong, the King thrust him forward and tripped him from behind, so that Goldry was crawled on his hands and knees. And the King clung to him from behind and passed his arms round his body beneath the armpits and so back over the shoulders, being minded to clasp his two hands at the back of Goldry's neck.

Then said Corund, "The Demon is sped already. By this hold hath the King brought to their bane more than three score famous champions. He delayeth only till his fingers be knit together behind the neck of the accursed Demon to draw the head of him forward until the bones of the neck or the breastbone be bursten asunder."

"He delayeth over long for my peace," said Gro.

The King's breath came out of him in great puffs and grunts as he strained to bring his fingers to meet behind Goldry's neck. Nor was it aught else than the hugeness of his neck and burly chest that saved the Lord Goldry Bluszco in that hour from utter destruction. Crawled on his hands and knees he could nowise escape from the hold of the King, neither lay hold on him in turn; howbeit because of the bigness of Goldry's neck and chest it was impossible for the King to fasten that hold upon him, for all his striving.

When the King perceived that this was so, and that he but wasted his strength, he said, "I will loose my hold on thee and let thee up, and we will stand again face to face. For I deem it unworthy to grapple on the ground like dogs."

So they stood up, and wrastled another while in silence. Soon the King made trial once again of the fall whereby he had sought to