

## STRONG as the Sun

*Strong as the Sun* is another novel by **Geoffrey Bingham**, the author of the two award winning books, *Tall Grow the Tallowwoods* and *Laughing Gunner*. It is a 320-page allegory-fantasy novel which any reader could enjoy for its action, without having to understand its deeper meaning. A allegory has been said to be 'a story about a story'. Well, here it is, the story of an unusual man, Balwone, living in a medieval setting, and catching up the wisdom, excitement, romance, intrigue and action of his age, but giving something unusually rich for our own age. It will be read by people of all ages with enjoyment as they follow the characters and intrigues of the servants of Massa—an even more mysterious figure than Prince Balwone.

# STRONG as the Sun

Geoffrey C. Bingham



**Troubadour Press Inc.**

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*Geoffrey C. Bingham*

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## Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Map</i>	<i>x</i>
1: Balwone the Great	1
2: Meeting Flamgrid, the Cobbler–Sage	28
3: Human, Celestial and Devilish Creatures	49
4: Moving Among Those of the Human Race	62
5: Balwone and Roget in the City of Cotillon	73
6: Setting Out to Return to Merphein and Flamgrid	92
7: The Meetings	100
8: The Pilgrimage to the Cobbler–Sage	110
9: Balwone, Gothic and the Tournament	119
10: The Knight and the Cobbler	132
11: The Preparation	140
12: The Commencement of the Great Venture	148
13: The Pilgrimage to the Great Forest	157
14: The Forest–Jungle of Allein	166
15: The Passage of Balwone the Great	175
16: The Battle with the Giants	186
17: More Giants to Battle	197
18: On towards the Mountain	205
19: On the Mountain	213
20: So Much Failure of Joy	222
21: So Much Joy at Failure	231
22: Dragons and Sages	240
23: The Coming of Massia	249
24: Massia Has Come	258
25: The People of Massia and the Most High	268
26: Massia’s People and His Revelation	278
27: The Love of Massia	288
28: The Blood of Love	297
29: A New Song Forever	308
<i>Glossary</i>	314

## Foreword

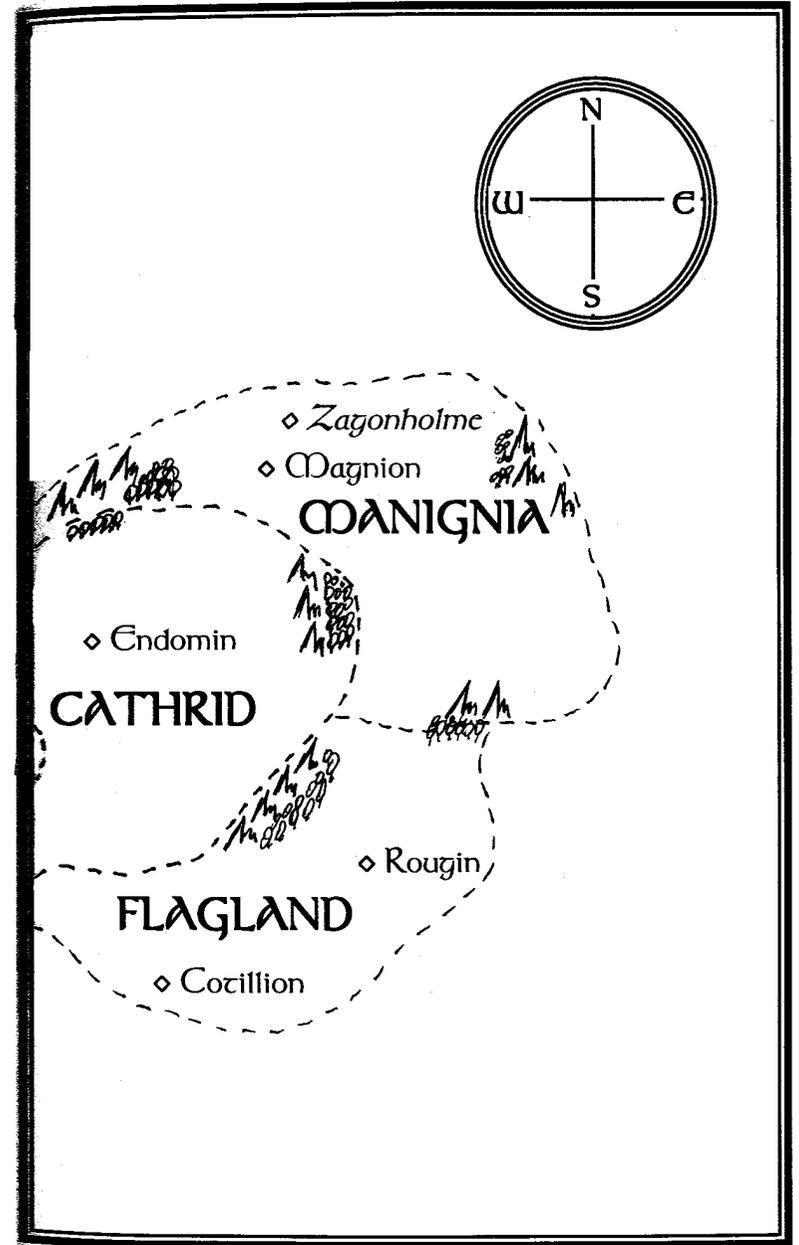
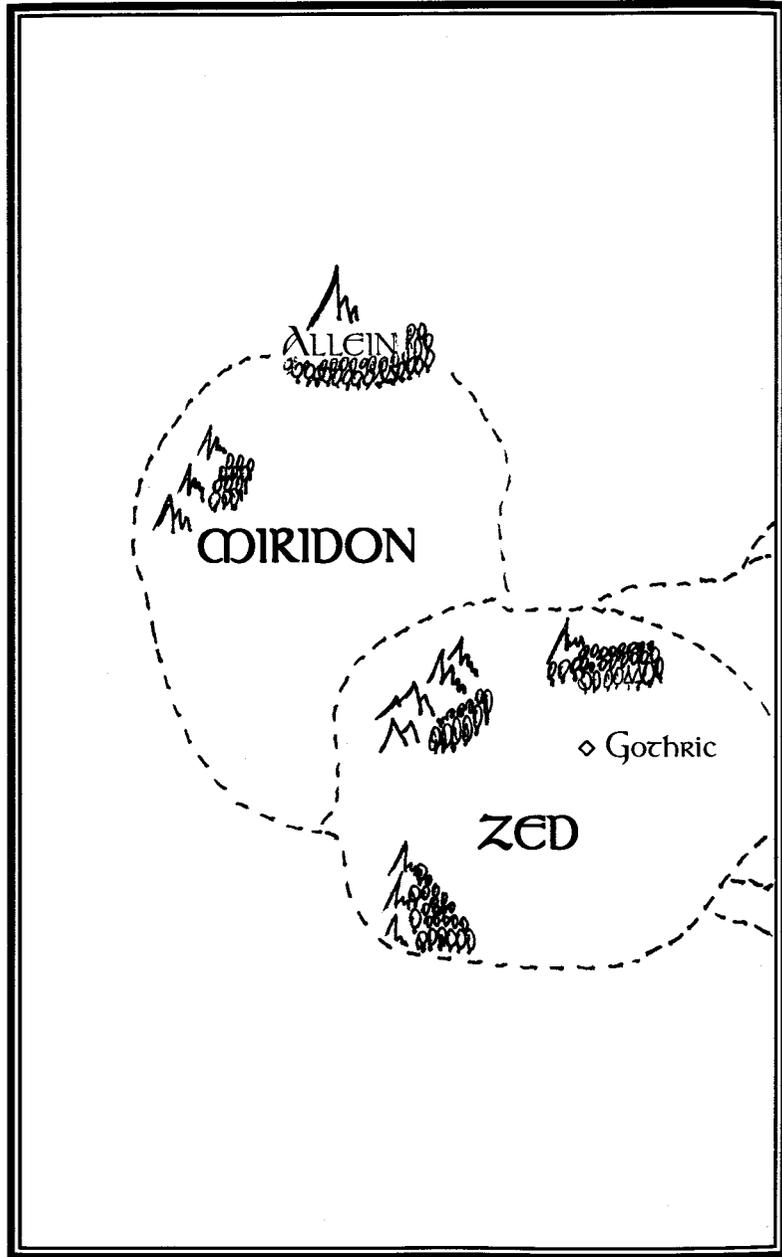
ONE OF the difficulties in writing a foreword to a book such as this is that the writer of allegory–fantasy type novels desires to give no clue as to their meaning. An allegory is described in dictionary language as a ‘figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another; a presentation of an abstract or spiritual meaning under concrete or material forms; a symbolic narrative’ (*The Macquarie Dictionary*, The Macquarie Library, 1987). In this sense an allegory is a mystery, and a mystery is really not a puzzle to be solved as one does a riddle, but a situation in which one lives, and which one experiences, though not irrationally. The enjoyment of such a mystery is that flashes of recognition come as the reader pursues the story. He—or she—feels as though on the edge of a revelation, and presses on to possess it. In no way must the author explain the meaning of the writing.

An allegory is out of the realm of giving proof. It may illuminate and even explain allegorically its subject under treatment, but must go no further. At all times it must be a good yarn, so that if the reader cannot get back to what the author is saying through his genre, yet the novel will be thorough-going entertainment, for entertainment is the hallmark of all good literature—fiction or otherwise.

This book arose out of a short story in a volume of mine, *Twice Conquering Love* (NCPI, 1992). The introductory story was an invention called ‘The Golden Egg of Love’ and I was urged by my good friend, Trevor Klein, who was, at that time, Manager of the Angus and Robertson Book Stores in South Australia, to expand it into a book. He threatened never to help me with my publications if I did not write this novel. I wrote the book and he has gone to some lengths to design the cover. My first volume of short stories was published by Angus and Robertson in 1981, entitled *To Command the Cats*, so there is some slight connection in publication. I tried to follow the story-line

of the 'Golden Egg of Love' and think I may have succeeded. I am glad Troubadour Press agreed to publish it.

I leave the reader to the delight of mystery, knowing that mystery is never a fantasy but truth as it becomes revealed to the reader. Many of my friends have a dislike of allegory-fantasy type stories, and I cannot altogether blame them. They are certainly not everyone's choice. Even so, I think any reader can just read a novel such as this for its action, enjoy that and forget trying to solve its meaning. I believe an allegory should never run riot, the author going crazy in his imagination and inventing characters and incidents which ultimately have no meaning. I call that cheating, and deny it is genuine creative writing. I feel sure I have not cheated in this book, but then even I, the present writer, might never know!



## CHAPTER ONE

## Balwone the Great: The Events Leading to His Birth and Lifework

THERE was once a man of great wisdom—‘Exceptional wisdom,’ they said—who lived in the ancient city of Gothric in the kingdom of Zed. As a child he had been given the name of Flamgrid. It was thought that he had descended from the ancient people of a great tribe of the East, but no one could be certain, for all that was known was that as a child he had been left, waif-like, on the doorstep of the home of a cobbler and his wife. As shall be seen, this cobbler and wife, themselves, had a history of being orphans, having been likewise abandoned in the kingdom of Zed. In the case of Flamgrid, it was thought he had been left by a tribe of gipsies who had passed through Gothric: not that it could have been said with certainty that the gipsies had abandoned him at the cobbler’s house. Certainly a mystery surrounded his coming to the city as a babe. The cobbler, Zemgrid, was himself a wise person, and so was his wife. As Zemgrid and his wife, Femgrid, fostered the waif, they discovered in him great depths of understanding that were ever a mystery and an amazement to them, wise as they both were. The child’s wisdom was also a delight to them, for the foundling seemed unaware of any brilliance of thought or perception, and was perpetually chuckling or laughing, and giving out his aphorisms guilelessly, so that there seemed to be nothing of the prodigy in him, and his foster-parents enjoyed him immensely. They had two other children—a boy, Bengrid, and a girl, Semgrid—who never seemed to be at all jealous of their remarkable foster-brother.

The community came to accept the fact of the fostered waif, and no fame or superstition grew up around him, especially as he learned to take up the trade of the cobbler, and to have no

aspirations to be a great scholar in the kingdom, or even to attend the university, which, anyway, was reserved for the sons of princes and other nobles. Whilst he certainly could have been taken for someone aristocratic, his simple clothes and his gentle manner of life disarmed those who might otherwise have been jealous or thought of him as one who considered himself a cut above his fellows.

He gave himself assiduously to cobbling, always being courteous to his superiors in life, but never obsequious. He had a strong but tender affection for his foster-parents and his foster-brother and -sister. At times he would express his gratitude to the family for their acceptance of him, and at such times even tears would flow from his eyes; yet no moment ever became too serious, and certainly he never descended into self-pity or things of morbidity. The family as a whole was given to joy and laughter, even though they did little more than eke out an existence.

The time came when Bengrid—Flamgrid's foster-brother—was established at the king's castle as the royal cobbler, and his sister, Semgrid, as a maid-in-waiting to Queen Mabila. Gothroyd, the king, was a man famed for many of his great exploits, and, on the whole, no monarch dared to invade the forest kingdom or gain power over the people of his domain. In the absence of his brother and sister, Flamgrid set about making his parents com-fortable and secure in their old age. His output as a cobbler was prodigious; so much so, that many wondered why the king had not installed him as the royal cobbler.

At nights, Flamgrid taught himself to read, and he was ever eager to obtain old manuscripts and to pore over them. Those were the days when pedlars travelled from country to country, and some of them claimed to have possession of special ancient doctrines that were invaluable to the human race, if truly wise scholars could interpret the parchments they sold. Often these pedlars were charlatans, secretly manufacturing copies of old documents, and cleverly disguising the fact that they were fakes. If the truth were told, many of the sellers of these documents were thieves who either stole them from libraries or manufactured them by the aid of impoverished scholars whose copying skills were able to deceive the readers who bought them.

Flamgrid had the power to discern between documents that were true or false, authentic or fake and, whilst he rarely had money with which to buy the writings he so loved, he would cobble shoes and boots to fit the feet of those who sold their wares, or he would make outright sales of his wares to pedlars who would exchange their treasures for his coveted footwear. In this way he kept his simplicity, guarded his entrance into knowledge and wisdom and lived in joy with Zemgrid and Femgrid in their autumn days of life.

\* \* \*

Flamgrid could also be said to be a true child of the forest. Having appeared mysteriously from it, he also often disappeared as mysteriously into it. Cobblers had special licences from the royal court to obtain the hides they needed for their trade, and this by killing a specified number of buck deer for general footwear, and the delicate chamois for the royal feet. The deer hunter would slay his animals, dry out the deer flesh by smoking it and pay a portion of the flesh, and tax on the hides, to the royal treasury. This privilege was accorded to very few, and Zemgrid was one of those. As he aged, he would send Flamgrid into the forest, and the young man would reappear when the meat and hides were properly cured. Sometimes Zemgrid wondered at the length of time his foster-son spent in the forest, but he supposed it was because deer were not easily tracked and slaughtered, especially as the only weapons Flamgrid carried were a bow and a hunting knife.

Zemgrid and Femgrid were two persons who had what some called 'the knowledge'. That is, they possessed a knowledge that was passed down within tribes of people—the wisdom of the ancients which was given only to selected persons. Somehow the elders would sense the calling of children to receive this knowledge and they would coach them in it, often taking them through special rituals, thus teaching them the ancient wisdom. Often this was the case in tribes who kept few, if any, written records.

It so happened that Flamgrid's foster-parents one day revealed that they had not been born into the kingdom of Zed, but had

themselves been part of a travelling tribe of people from the East. This tribe had been set upon in the kingdom of Cathrid—close by Zed—and their families had been destroyed. Only they had escaped, and, as children unrelated by birth, had wandered in the dark forest of Cathrid, finally making their way to the kingdom of Zed where the people of this village outside the city of Gothric had taken pity on them and given them asylum. They had been without possessions, and all they retained of their former life were the clothes that distinguished them as tribal people, and which they soon set aside for the clothing that the locals wore. Even so, they had stored away these clothes, and had treasured them as the only links with their past. The local community had always assumed the two lost children would support each other, and perhaps one day they would marry, and their assumption proved to be correct. No one questioned their living together as being immoral, and on the day of their nuptials, the villagers joined them in a wonderful wedding festivity.

The couple had always had an affinity with Flamgrid, thinking he might even have been from their tribe, but as there was no way of being sure of this, they had said nothing to him. Flamgrid had not come to them in tribal clothes, but wrapped only in a coarse, common blanket, thus being without a special identity. Now, as Flamgrid began to share special knowledge he had obtained from some of his beloved manuscripts, they felt such an affinity with him as to fall weeping when he would reveal certain wonderful truths to them. It was as though they had already known these truths, and were simply recognising things they had always known. Memories of what the elders had taught them would keep coming back, and these they shared with Flamgrid, who relished the intimacy of mind that special human beings can have when wisdom meets wisdom.

Flamgrid, for his part, would often be gripped by a great amazement when he shared the truths he had learned, finding that his parents already knew them. The great oral traditions that were passed down from generation to generation were—to those who had received them—unforgettable. Thus the history of the world from its inception was carried in the minds and memories of many tribes. It was Flamgrid, of all people, who resolved—if it

were possible—to transmit what was in such universal memory to written manuscripts. In order to disguise his developing scholarship, he kept at the humble trade of a cobbler, but all the while his mind was aflame with his ambition to serve the world in his day, and gather for it such a treasure of manuscripts as would, perhaps, change what he saw about him with his own eyes, and what he read in his precious parchments. What he saw was the power of human beings to bring misery to others, when, also, they had the power to bring joy, comfort and love.

For all his seeming guilelessness, Flamgrid was a shrewd perceiver of the human mind and heart. He observed the courtiers at the palace when he went to renew his licence and pay his fees for using the royal forest. He was dismayed by the chicanery of the many who demanded bribes to have the licence renewed, but whilst these things troubled him, his greater concern was that all was not well in the kingdom of Zed. The great feudal lords would oppress their serfs, keeping them in poverty by squeezing from them every bit of tax that was over and above fair dues. Bengrid and Semgrid would tell him of the bribery and corruption that was evident at court to all who were servants, and at times his own heart would grow angry at the unnecessary deceit that was practised.

Even so, it was not what his eyes saw which informed him of the nature of human beings in corruption. The manuscripts and parchments he read told of happenings at the beginnings of the human race, where ambition and jealousy were born, and where covetousness had its corruption, even to the point of mayhem and murder. It was to ponder these things that Flamgrid would slip away into the forest under pretext of obtaining deer flesh and hides. He had built for himself a log cabin which was hidden in impenetrable bush, and there he would lie on a rudely fashioned couch and ponder the matter of human nature. He would pore over his writings during the day, and lie awake at night trying to puzzle the mystery of the human race and the nature of the creation around him. Then he would sally forth at the right time of day to hunt the deer and do his work of smoking the deer flesh and curing the hides. These he would trundle back home on his

handcart, and his precious manuscripts would be protectively wrapped in the softest and gentlest of chamois suede.

\* \* \*

The sad day came when his parents were too feeble to work. He cared for them until the end: Zemgrid and Femgrid dying within days of one another. Before they died, they passed on to him their precious bundle of old clothes, preserved from the days of their orphanhood. Flamgrid preserved these also, lovingly, sensing that one day they would play a significant part in his life. Bengrid and Semgrid had often visited the old couple, but their hours of visitation were limited, so busy were they at the castle, and so pressed were they in their work. There was nothing at their parents' cottage which had any appeal to them, and they were glad for Flamgrid to take it for himself. Although they did not care to say so, they had come to dislike the smells of leather and smoked flesh, and had taken on new customs and manners in the royal ménage. Even so, they kept in touch with their foster-brother and furthered his cause in the ways that were possible through their being at court.

Before his death, Zemgrid had had a long and earnest talk with his foster-son, telling him matters that made Flamgrid wonder. He was not at all sure that his foster-father was wholly stable in his mind, for he told of amazing things concerning his own tribe, things he had hitherto withheld even in the deepest discussions they had shared regarding the ancient wisdom of the old man's tribe. It had been known as 'the Tribe of Peace', and had for centuries dedicated itself to bringing peace to mankind. Somewhere in the almost forgotten past, it had heard and shared ancient prophecies which foretold the day when the whole world would understand the nature of peace and seek after it. A great prince would come to lead them in this venture, and his name would be Massia, although the place of his birth and the family or nation from which he would spring was unknown. If it had been known, then that thread of the tapestry of prophecy had been lost.

Flamgrid marvelled as the old man—nigh unto exhaustion—poured these last hurried treasures into the ears of his lowly

listener. Tears prevented the younger man from fully seeing the face and eyes of his dying foster-father, but so great a light shone from that frail face that it seemed he was almost young again. For weeks after the deaths and the two simple services in which the old couple had been buried, the young sage could not forget the hot and burning words of the old man. He marvelled that such a store of wisdom could have been kept in the mind and memory of any one man, and he was grateful for things he had heard. He was quick to write them down, in order to preserve them, but even as he wrote, he wondered whether they had emerged from a fever or from a true recollection with which the children of the decimated tribe had been imbued at such an early age.

\* \* \*

One day Bengrid visited him with the alarming news that Gothroyd, the king of the kingdom of Zed, was arming for a terrible war that seemed to be on the way towards their land. Paelfric—the king of Cathrid, the neighbouring kingdom to Zed—had been warned of the advance of a strong army from the north-east under Zagon, king of the Manigs, a ferocious but cultured people of the land and kingdom of Maignia. It seemed that nothing would stem the tide of the triumphant horde, and Gothroyd and Paelfric had joined forces to halt and defeat the invaders. Something of dread stirred in the heart of Flamgrid, because he had been gifted—or perhaps cursed—with a prescience of events which rarely seemed to fail. He knew Zagon would be triumphant in his march upon Cathrid and Zed.

For some days he sat in his bush hut and pondered the matter. He went to the king's castle and asked for an audience with the monarch regarding the coming of Zagon and his forces. At first the king disdained to have a forest cobbler speak to him, but Bengrid assured the king that Flamgrid was no ordinary person.

'Sire,' he said, 'he is a young man, no doubt, but one filled with wisdom, wisdom that is rare even in those older than he. He also has certain gifts of nature whereby he can foresee things which will happen. I beg of you to give him an audience.'

Flamgrid, although a member of that kingdom from the days of his abandonment, had never been into the throne-room of the

palace at Gothric. He had, however, been in those offices in the palace where his cobbler's licence had been renewed. He had witnessed some of the chicanery of the officials, and even members of the aristocracy, but his eyes were dazzled by the beauty, the pomp and the majesty of the throne-room. Nevertheless his heart was wholly unmoved. When he was bidden, he drew near to the throne, and bowed low, but felt himself to be no menial, any more than he held pride within his heart for the wisdom that had been granted to him as a gift.

When the king bade him speak, he bowed again, and said gently, 'Your Majesty, this war which is about to happen with the coming of Zagon, will prove fatal to both the kingdoms of Cathrid and Zed.'

At that statement the king grew crimson with anger, and was about to order the forest cobbler to be led away to be punished and imprisoned, but a gesture of the young sage stayed his wrathful intention.

'Sire,' said the man, 'I come with wisdom, and not only with sad news. If Your Majesty will receive it, I have advice to give. I say, "Take your royal entourage, your army, and persuade the king of Cathrid likewise, and hide in the forests of both kingdoms until the enemy has passed through. He will doubtless ravage the land and spoil it of the treasures he can find, but as he lengthens his lines of war, he will come up against a foe even stronger than himself and be defeated and destroyed. Then you and the king of Cathrid can return and live in peace."'

The king exploded with contempt and rage. 'This is madness!' he cried. 'Is it that you are a spy and a messenger of Zagon that you tell me such things?'

Again the cobbler bowed low. 'Your Majesty,' he said, 'I come not with the wisdom by which men and women think, but through the wisdom given to me by the ancients and the insights of events which are granted as a gift to those whose calling it is to share such wisdom and prophetic knowledge.'

The king was impressed in spite of himself, and so he listened to the young man and, as he did, it seemed pictures presented themselves before his eyes—pictures of the cruel oncoming

horde, the fierce king who led them, and the avaricious intents and passions of the untutored men of war. It seemed also to him that the warlike host passed through both the kingdom of Cathrid and the kingdom of Zed, leaving a trail of devastation but not decimating the population or destroying the cities and hamlets. It was as though Zagon's gaze was set beyond their kingdoms, ambitious to dominate the world and somewhat impatient of such minor kingdoms as those of Paelfric and Gothroyd.

For some time he gazed upon the cobbler, and in his heart was considerable awe. Suddenly he gave commands for a carriage to be prepared which would take him—the king—and the cobbler to the palace of Paelfric, king of Cathrid. The next day they arrived in the principal city of Cathrid—Endomin—and there held court with Paelfric, Flamgrid being commanded to speak to Paelfric as he had spoken to Gothroyd.

Paelfric was more suspicious than Gothroyd had been, but he listened closely to what the cobbler said. Then he asked heavily, 'And where could the royal households of two kings be hidden in the forests of our two kingdoms?'

Flamgrid requested that none of the court be present when he divulged the places that could conceal the royal retinues. It could be that there might be spies within the palaces who would inform Zagon for profit and position. This made Paelfric even more suspicious, but, as he gazed at the young man, pictures grew in his mind of a dark forest, so dense that an enemy might not desire to penetrate it, and the possibility of such a place grew upon him.

Flamgrid explained how he had roamed the forests of both kingdoms, and how his foster-parents had shown him areas of the woodlands where no other person had ever set foot. Gradually both kings came to be convinced, and they placed themselves and their retinues in the hands of the cobbler. It seemed to them that this young man had a holy light in his eyes, a majesty of person and a wise assurance of the things he was telling them. Plans were made for the quick withdrawal of the royal households, the treasures of the states, and the preparing of the people for the invaders who were to be opposed, yet to be

appeared where possible. These preparations undertaken, the two kingdoms awaited the coming of the plundering horde.

\* \* \*

Three days later, the army of Zagon came tramping through the forest glades of the kingdoms of Cathrid and Zed. Flamgrid was seated at his cobbler's bench when King Zagon rode at the head of his troops under the banner and colours of his conquering army. At first he merely glanced at Flamgrid, and was about to pass when something of the stance of the young man seemed to impress him. He paused and beckoned the cobbler to him.

'How is it,' he asked, 'that you sit here, unafraid of an army that could destroy you in a moment?'

The young man smiled gently. 'Death has no fears for me, Your Majesty,' he said, 'for death and life alike are one. To live is to move towards death, but to die is to enter into life's richer fullness.'

'A sage!' said the king, astonished.

'A simple cobbler, Your Majesty,' said Flamgrid. 'One who would do no one harm, but who would seek to serve all men.'

'Then serve me nobly and immediately,' Zagon said. 'Tell me where two kings and their households have fled or hidden themselves.'

'It is for your sake they have done this,' said Flamgrid, 'for why should they fight you and destroy themselves, or hinder you in your onward march to further victory?'

Zagon burst out laughing. 'Forsooth, you are indeed a sage, though you as yet be young. But how do I know they will not close behind me and try to destroy my rearguard?'

The cobbler stared at him gravely. 'You do not know, My Lord, but there is one amongst you who can tell you. He it is from whose loins must come the man who will one day deliver us from all wars and conflicts.' With that he lifted an arm and pointed towards a knight clothed in dark armour, whose shield was of blue emblazoned with a shaft of gold, as though the sun lay athwart it.

The king looked towards him, and said good-humouredly, 'Facius? My mild and gentle Facius? Why, this man has not even

wedded, and is not young. He is a scholar I take with me, for I am by comparison a rude and untutored man, albeit I am ruler over many nations. I have little confidence that he will bring me victory by his sword, albeit he may encourage me in my endeavours of ruling the lands I conquer.'

The knight in black armour lifted his visor and stared gravely at Flamgrid. After a time he nodded gently, wheeled his mount, and said to Zagon, 'This man speaks true. We will have no trouble from Paelfric and Gothroyd or their houses. Let us hasten through these two kingdoms and surprise our other enemies yonder.'

With sorrow in his heart, Flamgrid saw the dark storm on the face of the king. He did not like his original plan to be thwarted —of conquering the two kingdoms through cruelty and rapine, gathering up the treasures of spoil in his onward march and leaving behind him marshals who would rule the people, exacting tribute until the land was wrung dry of its life and denuded of its riches. Such kingdoms became craven before conquerors, and had little heart for rebellion.

'I will have none of their escaping,' Zagon cried. 'I will put the land to the sword and to fire. I will destroy the inhabitants for the insolence of their kings!'

He saw the troubled countenance of the young sage. 'Have no fear, cobbler,' he said, 'for I will spare you. If I let this stratagem succeed, I will be the laughing stock of other people. This day they shall see in Cathrid and Zed that I am the mighty Zagon of Manignia, the feared conqueror of all nations.'

He wheeled his great steed and lifted his sword above his head. At his gesture the trumpeters blew the advance, and the infantry followed fast behind the cavalry as they sped through the forest to ransack Gothric and the surrounding cities of Zed. Zagon either did not see the knight in dark armour wheel out of the vanguard and ride back to Flamgrid, or he did not care.

Facius and Flamgrid remained in silence as they regarded one another. Finally, Facius spoke.

'I salute you, my young friend. I see you have the vision and the gift. Therefore I would speak with you.'

He dismounted, reined his mount to a sapling, and sat beside the cobbler who was working at his bench. 'Tell me what you have seen in regard to me, and the son you say will one day bring peace to the world.'

Flamgrid worked deftly with his awl, piercing the supple leather of a sole before he began sewing with the twine that would hold the upper part of the shoe. As he concentrated upon his work, it seemed that a vagrant shaft of afternoon sun broke through and glowed in his fair hair like a halo. As he turned his blue eyes to stare into those of the knight, that warrior found the gaze most intense and disconcerting. The silence was about them, as though speech would be premature before thought fulfilled itself.

Finally the younger man spoke. 'Zagon will bruise and hurt the people of these two kingdoms,' he said, 'but he will not win the final victory. Premature death is ordained for him, whereas today he could have been merciful and given joy to the families who now must know only sorrow. Even so, he will go from victory to victory until it is his destiny to die, that another might arise out of his ashes and be the true man of peace.'

Facius gripped the cobbler's right arm with his mailed fist until the other man felt his bones must crush under the pressure.

'This man of peace,' he almost hissed, 'who is he? Where will he come from? What manner of person will he be? Will he truly bring peace?'

Flamgrid desisted from his work. He felt the pain of the knight's grip, and winced. 'It is not the man of peace who is first promised, but the man of love. Love alone will relieve this world of its unnecessary sorrows and cruelties that men and women wreak on one another.' When the other man remained silent, he added, 'It is written in the Writings, and none can reverse their eternal decrees.'

The knight stood up, walked furiously around the grassy glade, right mailed-fist beating into left mailed-fist, his arms then being thrown upwards, and his voice addressed to the heavens.

'When,' he cried, 'when will come this one of love? It is of him I have thought all my life. It is for his coming I have prayed to whatever gods there may be, but none has answered me.'

He came back to Flamgrid, peered into his eyes, and asked pleadingly, 'Tell me of this one. I desire to hear nothing of any other but him. Tell me of him.'

The cobbler gave him a gentle look, but his gaze was over and beyond the dark knight. It seemed he was seeing a vision in the clear blue sky of the afternoon. The sounds of warring soldiers were now afar off, and silence was descending, a silence as gentle as the eyes of Zemgrid's foster-son.

Flamgrid said gently, 'This one of love will come from your loins, and from the womb of his quiet dam. Your spirits are wed to bring the man of hope to the universe, but neither of you will live to see him break open the source of love to the world which now sees love only as weakness, and compassion as the affection of the witless.'

Facius gripped again the right hand of the cobbler, but this time his hold was more gentle. 'What great inwit is it that you have and I lack? I have pored over the writings of the fathers and the other ancients, but never have I seen this promise of love. It is a different promise. The other is of peace, but this is of love. Whence comes such a promise?'

Flamgrid did not answer him directly. 'There is also a promise of joy,' he said, 'for our race is a sorrowful one. The inner wounds of men and women are even more terrible than those without. Children suffer and groan in the night, and there is no one to behold their tears. Their tears dry into their very souls and they become hard and cruel in themselves. They grow into the Zagons of this age.'

For a time he was silent, and then he went on, 'You, Facius, are a gentle one. You are no lover of war, but there is constant warring in your spirit against the cruelty of man. Therefore it will be your son who will carry your thoughts into action. The lady you will marry is like you, and from you both he who is to tell the world of love will be born.'

Facius closed his visor, for his eyes were melting with the tears that were flowing. He mounted, wheeled once in a salute to the silent cobbler, and hurried down the forest track to catch the vanguard of Zagon's army.

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It was the wise cobbler who wept the next day as he surveyed the devastation wrought by the wild horde that had swept through both kingdoms, destroying and pillaging, sparing neither serf nor yeomen, lord nor peasant, man nor woman. Even little children lay stiff in their death rigours with terror and horror still spelling out the cruelty of the invader. Flamgrid did not wonder at the horror he felt in his heart. His spirit seemed wounded beyond all bearing, but there was faint comfort when he knew that his words to Zagon had taken the edge off the inane cruelty of the man. Doubtless that king thought he would return, and rout out the royal households and bring down judgment upon them. In his heart, the cobbler knew this could not be the case. It was not written in the Writings that Zagon would do other than perish by the sword as he had caused others to perish. Of all the knights only Facius would return to his land. There were others as cruel as Zagon in the destinies of tyrants. Even so, this was of little comfort to Flamgrid.

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The monarchs returned proudly, again setting up their dynasties as though there had been no Zagon, but the people remembered it was the cobbler's wisdom which had helped to save the day, terrible as it had been. Gothroyd and Paelfric made offers of wealth, status and fame to Flamgrid, but he preferred only to stay in his forest home and cobbler for those who needed him. More and more he retired to his inner forest cabin, so that undisturbed he might gain even greater wisdom, that he might serve the human race and prepare for the era of love that was to break across it one day.

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Other wise men sought him out, and many of them brought writings such as he had not seen. One day one of them came clothed with the same kind of garments as Zemgrid and Femgrid had worn as children. When Flamgrid saw an ancient and stooped pilgrim thus clothed, his heart leapt within him, and he could

scarcely wait to greet the traveller. The great mastiff that followed meekly at the heels of the visitor seemed to be as gentle as his master.

For his part the traveller seemed to know the cobbler. 'Hail, O son of Zemgrid and Femgrid!' he cried. 'At last my eyes have come to see one who is my brother!'

With heart still pounding, the cobbler waited for an explanation. The old visitor said no more but sat on a bench, panting from exhaustion, and drinking a proffered beaker of cider. The mastiff settled himself quietly at the old man's feet, nuzzling against the ankles and yet looking up with patience at his new host.

When he had finished he nodded to Flamgrid. 'You are indeed one of us,' he agreed, as though answering an unseen speaker. 'Yours is the fair hair, and the blue eyes, and you have the sight that others lack! They told me you would be here, yet I could scarce believe it. You are truly one of the wise race, one of the Shemgridions.'

'Surely,' said Flamgrid, 'I know of the Shemgridions, for they were—and are—a special race. In the manuscripts they are known as 'the people of Massia'. I have read that they have their roots in an even more ancient race, but they separated over the matter of Massia's coming. I cannot believe I am of these people!'

On impulse the cobbler disappeared into his cottage, rummaged in the old oak chest, and brought out the clothing of his foster-parents. His visitor gazed on them for some moments, and then nodded.

'These are the clothes they wore as children; the clothes of Zemgrid and Femgrid. They were almost the last of our tribe, but some escaped that dreadful day and returned to tell us—the remnant—of the dark and terrible deed that had been wrought. Yet it was meant to be. They were to await your coming as a foundling, because you were of the same tribe, but you had been born wise, and were to be taught by them until the day of the appearing of the one of love, the Massia of the great Writings.'

Flamgrid said quietly, 'I came with no such clothes. I was wrapped in an ordinary blanket, undesigned, so plain and common. There is no guarantee that I am of the Shemgridions.'

The visitor was unperturbed. 'It is clear who you are,' he said, 'one of the wise, those whom we call "hierophants", for in the order of things, they pass down, through the stages of human understanding and growth, the things of true wisdom. Such wisdom has been gained at much cost, because the people of the Most High suffer and learn of the nature of their true Maker, since nothing ever comes into being of itself. You are such a one. You do not aspire to be great in this world, as this world thinks of greatness. By birth you are fulfilling your destiny. You are one of the truly "Feeble People".'

All of this would have seemed beyond normal human understanding had not Flamgrid spent many hours with the Writings, so that now he was able to recognise the truth of what his aged visitor was saying. Moreover, he looked into the eyes of the other and they knew they had knowledge which was shared, and wisdom which was mutual. Flamgrid experienced a deep thrill when he was included amongst the Feeble People, for he knew of them. They were not just as members of one tribe but were dispersed, so to speak, amongst all the tribes of men, even those of the conqueror Zagon—men such as Facius and Zemgrid, and women such as Femgrid.

Flamgrid asked the visitor his name. 'Sophius,' he replied, 'son of the princely Pirinus, the last leader of our tribe, who handed on to me the few writings our people possessed. We have always taken pride in committing the truth to memory, knowing the oral traditions to be more trustworthy than the scribes can commit them. Each scribe is tempted to add his own additions and commentaries, and in time the original message is nigh on lost in these worthy accretions.'

Flamgrid and Sophius talked far into the late afternoon, each with a hand laid on the child-garments of the departed Zemgrid and Femgrid, as though, almost, there were power in the clothes so long and lovingly preserved. When it came time for supper, they both hunted herbs and forest fruits, and made a great meal out in the open before the cobbler's bench and, with the addition of sweet deer flesh, they ate provender until their stomachs were full. It required only the liberal drinking of the fine cider—strong in its stimulation—to make them feel the heavens had come down

to men, and immortals had walked amongst them. Perhaps it was that they walked among immortals, for that was how it seemed to be to them. It did not matter which was the case, for they were feasted with food for the stomach, substance for their minds, and sustenance that satisfied their spirits, so they spoke long into the night before they went into the great snoring. Sophius's great mastiff had fared well with the leftovers from the two men, but his eyes were kept open lest an enemy come to disturb the peace of the forest.

Next morning Sophius made ready to depart. He had some instructions for his younger friend.

'Do not leave this place until it is time for you to find him whom they call Massia. In due time he will come into his own; meanwhile he will be taking every experience of life that comes his way. It is necessary he learn wisdom, for wisdom is the basis of all true living, and is rich beyond human ambition. It is not only coming to know all things as they really are, but it is the right use of them.'

He paused and gazed into Flamgrid's eyes. 'There are those who know much, but live so little by what they know. They are the people of knowledge but not always of wisdom. Wisdom is doing what is the will of the High One, and that will is placed within the deepest place of knowledge that a man or woman can know. Whilst it is given to all to know, it is not all who care to know, for they sense that the demands of such knowledge will absorb all their living, and they wish—many of them—to go their own ways, and to have peace and joy within themselves.'

The old man smiled softly over what he had said, and gave a gentle sigh: 'To know the will of the High One is to do it, and to do it is to know it. More need not be said.'

He then looked down at his favourite hound. 'When the day comes,' he said, 'you will know it is time to seek out this man called Massia, and you will know because this hound of mine—whose name is Morna—will seek you out. By that time, I trust, I will be among the immortals where wisdom is not learned by pain, for that has already happened.'

He stroked the great mastiff, catching the ears in his huge hands and toggling them. 'It will be difficult to say goodbye to

this old friend, but then the time will have come, as it always does, according to the true wisdom.'

With reluctance, Flamgrid bade farewell to the frail and stooped old man, but he saw the strength in the man's eyes, and was not perturbed. He rubbed his own strong hands and arms along the flanks of the mastiff, who seemed to show pleasure, but there were tears in the eyes of the three of them as they parted. He watched the tall man and the great hound diminish until they were but specks on the forest tracks, and he could not prevent the rivers of joy and sadness which flowed from his own eyes. It had been an unusual experience to speak to a man full of both years and wisdom, and to hear his own words as echoes of the mind of the other.

Flamgrid knew, now, what he should do. He should gain wisdom until the day the young Massia would come riding into his life, and then that for which he—Flamgrid—had been born, would be fulfilled. That was all that mattered. The more one gathered wisdom, the more one wished to live by it. As the Masters before him had said, 'To do that will—that is all of wisdom!'

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Vast changes had taken place in the kingdom of Manignia. The death of their most famous king and warrior had brought shock and horror to the inhabitants of the land. Each new king would be called Zagon, since it was thought that the soul of the departed king entered into the body of the new monarch.

Of all the mighty warriors, Facius alone had been spared in war. He had no stomach for being king, although the people implored him. However, they knew that he had no desire for war, and they could not see their land as being inviolable under the rule of a man of peace. So they chose a new Zagon, a veri-table mountain of a fellow whose very size brought fear into the eyes of those who beheld him. He was a merry man, but his florid face could set firm as a rock, and his brown eyes that were limpid in laughter could become like dark balls of iron when anger visited him. He was a man for whom they could have some

love, but often they feared him more, even, than the Zagon who had conquered many kingdoms.

The new Zagon was considerate of Facius, saving him from having to share the ruling of the kingdom. The castle named *Zagonholme*, which the old Zagon had given the chief knight, was in size and beauty beyond even his own palace and ancestral home. It was situated outside the city Magnion, and Facius delighted in its environment, for here he could pursue his studies in peace. Nor had this peace been broken when at the age of fifty-five he had married Merphein, a niece of the former king. She was no less gentle than he, although her will was strong, and she had dreamed of having a son who would be as great and kindly a man as his father, but perhaps even more in strength of purpose and, therefore, great in proper accomplishment. She always seemed awkward in the presence of the writings of Facius's large library, and even more awkward when he talked of the mysteries of the past, the portents of the future, or spoke special wisdom in the present.

Her wish of a son had been granted, for the day had come when Balwone was born. Merphein was past the age of forty years, but her son was born without complications, and his coming strengthened her more than ever. She set about nourishing him into a fine figure of a boy, and saw that he was taught the skills and art of sport, of knighthood, chivalry and the tournament.

All were astonished at his good looks. He was handsome to the point of being beautiful, yet masculine to the point of being stronger than other men, and royal to the degree that many saw him as the next Zagon. When very young he could sit astride the sturdy mounts of the day, and make his way through fell and forest without being dismounted. He needed no saddle and scorned even the heavy bridle of the day. He would either have a light halter, or he would cling to the mane of his steed and direct him strongly where he would. Merphein kept her delight secret to herself, for she knew that Facius required more of his son than attainment in the skills of a warrior and noble. He knew of the nobility of wisdom, and yearned that his son should learn what he, himself, knew.

Nor did Balwone disappoint him. Facius would have loved to have called his son Massia, but he dared not. Not only would all eyes have been upon the boy, and the elders of the land have sought him out and exalted him, but it was little less than blasphemy to give this name to one of whom the sages spoke so highly. Balwone, therefore, remained his name, yet its meaning was 'great deliverer', so that most thought he might one day attain to being a Zagon in his land.

The way in which Balwone did not disappoint his ageing father was this: Balwone loved to visit the sages even when he was a stripling of a boy, and he was forever discussing with them the questions that came to his mind about life. He was keen-eyed and did not miss the fact that all human beings did not live as equals. Whilst many of the serfs and peasants seemed to pass pleasant enough lives, Balwone knew they did not live as he did—in reasonable ease and pleasure. They had to work hard in order to produce their crops and warrant the huts and houses in which they lived. It seemed the system was such that no man could rise above the station to which he was born. Yet the son of Facius noted that the women did craftwork which was of a high quality, and that the men shaped beautiful furniture in the little time they had spare from their labours. They were jealous for their few possessions, as those gave them a nobility which was no less than the lords of manors and serf-doms.

He always puzzled about the matter of humanity—the mystery of men and women—for although many men saluted their masters and mistresses, and women bowed and curtsied, he sensed behind their outward submission a hauteur of spirit which he greatly admired. Hence he would talk to the wise men and the scholars about the nature of man and his world. There were theologians enough to occupy him all his life, but he was selective in presenting himself. Only certain ones among them appealed to him. He had a quick way of sensing what was straw and chaff, and what was grain and fruit.

Facius was overjoyed that his son would come to him and ask questions about life. Most of all, he sought to instil in the lad a view of humanity which would prevent cynicism setting in, in

later life. He, himself, had fought against such—so much so that men said he had 'a sweet spirit', 'a gentle and docile affection', and that he was without pride and ambition that was to be seen in many of his peers of the realm.

Balwone was a tempestuous boy in spite of the fact that there was a gentle side to his nature. Like his mother, he was most determined to get the best out of life and to use the opportunities available to him. That was why he would ride with passion; joust with vigour; argue in temper when injustices were done; and fight with fury when roused by such. He would sit for hours, listening to the exploits of past kings and nobles, to say nothing of the doughty yeomen who had delivered their kingdom from invaders or invaded other kingdoms for the glory of their Manignia.

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There were great days of joyfulness when Facius would take his son into the royal forest and they would hunt for venison. On the way—as they meandered or travelled purposefully—the father of the boy would teach him the lore of birds and animals, and even of trees and flowers. He would point out the uses of different herbs, flowers and leaves. He would teach his son the order that lay in all nature, the differences in species and some of the laws of their kingdoms. At such times Balwone's love for his father would increase, and he would have a yearning to be wholly wise, to know all things, and to act rightly in all the ways of his life. He could not express this love in outward ways, but it strengthened his heart, and he believed his life would be useful.

Most of all, Balwone loved to accompany his father when he went on his long searches for manuscripts and ancient parchments. They would visit the religious houses and search through libraries in order to find treasures of wisdom. Facius's son knew how to sit silently and absorb the teaching of his elders as they discussed with his now-ageing father the truths they had discovered. Sometimes he would tremble as he felt himself to be on the verge of a truth which, if understood, might fashion the whole manner of his life. For the present he consumed snatches of what

he heard, but, as yet, the ability to make all the elements come together in a whole was not his. He knew his father had this skill, and he envied him for it. Even so, his memory retained what he heard, and sometimes he would be surprised by the occasions when stored truths returned to him to give some intelligence to the events and episodes of his life.

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It was with some dismay that Merphein saw her husband weakening in his body, growing frail in himself, and often dis-interested of the times and the occasions in which he was living. More and more his eyes held a dreamy look, as though he were seeing something afar off, and longed to reach it and find ultimate peace. She had a deep passion for the man, for there was none like him in all the kingdom of Manignia. Her own father, brother of the former king, was a man of dark moods and cold angers, so that to come into the sunlight of a person such as Facius had brought her intense joy. She had also seen what he had given to her Balwone, and at times he would take her aside and prophesy of the man their son would be.

What he said of Balwone was even beyond her ability to believe, or even capture the concepts he fashioned for her thinking. He was confident that she would never urge the young man on to foolish ambitions—such as striving to be the next Zagon or to take part in the unseating of the present monarch. What Facius feared most was the bitterness and cynicism into which he, himself, had almost fallen because of the evil of his peers, some of the merchant class and those of the peasantry who were jealous of their superiors. He was always seeking to penetrate the mystery of birth and of personal human destiny, and found his relief and solace in the prophecies of the ancients—that one day the earth would be a place of peace and true love.

Often men would say of him, ‘That Facius is too good a man to be living on this earth. He refuses to think evil of any one, and that is not natural. Men and women are evil, and he should face the fact, not escape into a magic castle of his own making.’

In this they had misjudged Facius, for he not only thought

there was evil throughout humanity, but he knew of dark powers which sought to shape the fate of the nations, which worked to twist the souls and minds of persons, and to distort the beauty that was natural to the creation of the Most High. He was also aware that there were good powers who tried to uplift human beings, and which sought to bring peace to tribes and nations which were ever in conflict. What he did not know in full was whether the great Maker could sufficiently control all forces—good and evil—and work them to his advantage, and to the peace of the world.

He was, thus, among the many who looked for a special One to come—a man whose nature was all light, who would have nothing to do with the powers of darkness but would be greater than all of them. Among the ancient Writings he had sought to find clear omens and portents that could assure him a great One such as the Massia was somehow purposed. Without seeking to subvert the mind of his son, he tried to train his thinking towards the future. It was in the future that he tried to discover hope for the present.

As the days passed, Merphein became more anxious. She saw her husband weakening in his body, though his mind was as firm and fine as ever. Nevertheless, the dreamy look in his eyes, and the patient bearing of his body, told her that he longed to go on the pilgrimage which takes men and women away from this life and brings them to that which they have long desired.

It was in one of his days of weakness that Facius had a strong mood come upon him in which he decided he must travel afar to the kingdom of Zed, and again hold converse with the sage, Flamgrid. Not only did he wish to do this, but also he desired that Balwone go with him. Balwone was now a young man, very much occupied with sports, and especially with jousting. As a squire he was an attendant upon Husius, the brother of the former king, and he was learning to earn his spurs. Because of the demands upon his time, it seemed he would be unable to accompany his father, but Husius urged him to do so.

‘It may be that your father has not long to live,’ he said. ‘It will give him great pleasure to have you attend him. Later there will be time for other things.’

Husius had a mind to the young man, Balwone, and his intentions towards him were not always good. Even so, he sensed Facius's impending death, and pitied the man who could have been king but had chosen the life of a scholar. To Husius, the throne was the most coveted place on all the earth, and he would have given much to have become the new Zagon. It was a source of sadness to him that the present king was not only robust, but astute enough to discern disloyalty, and strong enough to hold the reins of the kingdom and reign in power.

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Balwone had lately come to realise that some of the gift of prescience which his father possessed was also in his own spirit. On this occasion he was extremely uneasy. He sensed that his father might die on their travels, and have to be carried home on a bier; that the journey which his father was setting such store by might end in tragedy. Even so, he knew the pilgrimage to Flamgrid was unavoidable.

Nothing like this seemed to be in Facius's mind. His eyes were gentle, and a quiet smile played about his lips as they set out with a retinue of servants and soldiers. The forests had their bands of robbers and thieves, and men who had escaped from the barracks of the palaces. The caravan would have to pass through two other kingdoms, but permission had been given, and there would be no likelihood of treachery, for Facius was known as a man of peace, and the capture or killing of him would be of no advantage. Facius knew this fact, and so his going was of great joy to him. He had in mind having a last session with Flamgrid, but letting his son have his first. He knew the futures of the two men were tied together, but he longed most of all that his son should fulfil that for which he was born—a destiny which he scarcely dared believe, but which he knew in his heart was ordained. The word 'Massia' was on his lips, but he was afraid to mouth it, even to himself.

Their journey was not without events. The entourage was aware that somewhere—although some distance from them—there were men or other creatures who watched their going

through the forests. Facius knew something of supernatural beings which tried to order the affairs of the human race, but he had never encountered them either materially or in a supernatural realm. By nature a realist, the quiet noble avoided raising situations which brought him into contact with supernatural beings, or them with him. He knew he lived in an age when human beings were superstitious about ghosts and spirits and creatures from an unseen realm, but, because he had been free of them, he had often wondered whether they did not deem him worthy of interest or interference. The peaceful part of him had been glad of that, but, within, he wondered whether there was not a warring from which he had somehow deliberately withdrawn. This was why he was deeply interested in Balwone's sensing of hidden powers. In the end he went back to his more rational view of assuming that those beings were human and were making sure that the journey of this caravan was not intended to be hostile to the kingdoms the old Zagon had ravaged or conquered.

It was Balwone who sensed the presence of unknown powers, and he showed his unease to his father. 'What are these creatures,' he asked, 'and why should they follow us?'

'In the Writings,' said the older man, 'there are creatures which have astral origins. They are said to be linked with the stars, to be creatures of beauty, and to have been given commands for the good of mankind. Many of them—like the human beings they are supposed to serve—have gone their own ways, and use their powers for their own advancement. Some are said to have a hatred of mankind, born out of jealousy for the human race and its liberty throughout nature, so they seek to harm mankind.'

These things Balwone had not heard. He had been told of evil spirits and ghostly apparitions. Indeed, he knew of the numerous shrines that city, country and forest folk had erected, and the mystery which surrounded the rituals that attended them. He knew that most men and women were devotees of one supposed deity or another. All this he had put down to foolish superstition, but now something stirred within him, and he desired to know more. Was there, indeed, an unseen world, and were there unseen powers? The hidden forces that were following them

through their forest travels—were these supernatural, demonic, or were they just human, persons defending their kings, following them with suspicion, even alarm?

Facius confessed his comparative ignorance to Balwone, as also the fact that his realism stopped with the five senses and three dimensions which humans know. He stood by the reasoning with which he had always regarded things that are seen. He never doubted that wisdom was needed to understand what one saw and felt, and that although thought itself could not be seen, yet understanding thought about all things had been deeply developed in the sages, and such he called 'knowledge and wisdom'. He was uneasy about the world which was unseen. It was this world—the world in which all human beings lived—that he desired to be peaceful and joyful and loving.

Balwone said, 'Could it not be that much of human evil is stirred up by some of these creatures? We have seen men and women do terrible things. Do they do them from themselves, or are they moved from outside to do such evil?'

'Ah!' said Facius. 'This has been the question that has ever been asked down through all the generations. My belief is that every person is responsible for what he does, and we cannot blame unseen creatures. Perhaps we have invented them in order to pass off the blame which we feel in our consciences. If we must be accountable wholly for all we have ever done, then we have much corruption in the human race. No wonder we would like to blame these things on unseen and active powers!'

Facius noted that Balwone seemed to have entered into a mood hitherto unknown to either of them. It seemed that the forces following them gave more distinct proof of their presence, and many a time they stopped and drew their swords, spears and pikes as though awaiting some onslaught, but when they halted, the forest would first be silent, and then begin to be filled with the normal rustling of creatures, and the glorious songs and whistlings of the birds. No: there was no danger behind them.

For Balwone, the mood was one of contemplating the possibility of forces he had not known previously to exist. Since his birth he had had a conviction that he was different from all whom he knew, that his destiny was one other than that of all

human beings, and, whilst the conviction sometimes troubled him, for the most part he let it be, without pondering it over-much. His mother, Merphein, he knew to be a woman of quiet depth. He sometimes wondered whether she were not in contact with spirits that were unseen but good in nature, even holy. Again, he had not penetrated this dimension, preferring to let his mother be a woman of wonderful depths, and one who taught him another kind of wisdom than that which his great father knew.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Meeting Flamgrid, the Cobbler–Sage

BALWONE noticed the growing tension in his father, but he knew it to be not the tension of fear but of delight. The old man's eyes shone, and his frail figure seemed to gather some mysterious strength. He was urging on his great mount, and the music of the trappings of the horses, the jingling of the traces that drew the mess-wagon, the yelping of the hounds and the songs of the knights of the retinue grew as they were clearly approaching the part of the forest in the kingdom of Zed where Flamgrid lived.

Surely enough, they broke into the open glade, and there was Flamgrid at his cobbler's bench. The tall trees around made the glade like a quiet arena, and bluebells, buttercups and gentle flowers of the forest made it also a garden of delight. For his part, the cobbler seemed unaware of the idyllic setting in which he lived. He looked up with interest and simple delight, ceased to use his tools of trade and rose to meet Facius. The knight descended from his horse and removed his helmet. Balwone did likewise, and the three men regarded each another in silence. Flamgrid gave a gentle bow, and the two men bowed in return, their motions being moved by deep respect. It seemed to Balwone that his future lay somehow in this golden-haired man whose blue eyes shone with light and whose fair skin was almost translucent. In some way, he seemed to be a rare saint in a bower of beauty.

Facius's eyes filled with tears of joy. 'Flamgrid,' he said, 'this is a great day for me and my people.' He nodded towards Balwone. 'And especially for my son, Balwone.'

The two younger men bowed in the salute of intimacy that like minds instinctively have. The mailed visitors sat down on forest logs long felled for the comfort of visitors, and now green with moss befitting what seemed to be a veritable fairy-bower. Facius gave orders for the retinue to dismount and attend to their steeds, whilst the master of the hounds settled his panting animals and quietened them with their daily ration of meat and the water of

the stream that flowed nearby. Whilst they were settling, Flamgrid threw a concoction of herbs into his ever-boiling cauldron, and soon all in the retinue were sharing the delicious, reviving herbal tea.

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Flamgrid did not miss the frailty of the ageing knight, and he felt sorrow in his heart. He had always marvelled that a king so uncouth and rumbustious as the former Zagon had seen fit to let the quiet Facius have his way in counselling, and in his gentle manner of life. Like Balwone, the cobbler knew this was the last journey of his old friend—the man of peace. That seemed to make their discourse all the more wonderful and pleasurable. Also in it was the power which comes from the affinity of like minds, for the two men gave of their wisdom, each to the other. Then—at a certain point—Balwone felt free to join the discussion. It was all about the peace of the human race, the joy of nature and humanity and the goals which the human race should set before it.

Facius's argument was not new. Men and women should dissolve their enmities and live at peace. Flamgrid agreed with him, but he asked what it was that kept persons and nations at enmity with one another. They discussed the great Writings they had read, and agreed that it was ambition which lay at the root of the differences known to all human beings, especially those who were fledglings in wisdom.

'Let all men reject ambition,' said Facius, 'and enmity will shrivel away.'

'Men seem driven to ambition,' Flamgrid said, 'and they will not easily loose their hold of it. The ancients say that jealousy and

greed so grip the human spirit that they cannot let ambition die. They are ever driven on to win their goals and will destroy those who seek to hinder them.'

'Ah,' said Facius, 'it seems that we live always at the expense of others.' He nodded towards his own retinue. 'But surely we can do this with kindness and a gracious spirit. We need hurt none along the way we travel.'

'You seem to set a high regard for all human creatures,' the cobbler said, his eyes matching the bluebells of the glade. 'Such thinking is heresy where monarchs invoke the divine right of kings, and no man is supposed to advance upon the state into which he was born.'

'It is love we must seek to bring into the spirits of men and women,' said Balwone. He flushed with colour in his cheeks, because he felt his wisdom might sound naïve to his father and the sage of Zed. As he spoke, he knew it was not the wisdom of the Writings he was expounding, but the wisdom of Merphein, his mother. If anything, that made him blush more deeply. He highly respected her as a woman whose intuition was simple, but whose wisdom was no less than that of the great sages.

Flamgrid looked at him intently. 'Some of the sages say that whilst love would change the nature of our race, it requires much suffering and such preliminary actions as might even destroy those who would teach all men to love.'

'There have been communities of love,' Facius ventured, 'and they have lived in peace. Sooner or later, however, that love has turned back into self-love, and the community has been disturbed, and fear has destroyed its amity.'

So they talked on until it came to be the time of the evening meal. The retinue of the great knight began preparing dinner, opening up barrels of victuals, and uncorking the casks of sweet wine. Flamgrid made a generous offer of his venison flesh, which was taken up gladly, and, before long, the household was enjoying its supper.

After supper, the wine so stirred the spirits of those who served the leaders of the expedition that they began to sing their ancient songs and play their age-old melodies. Precious instruments of music were unwrapped from their chamois covers, and

soon there were the ancient melodies of romance, chivalry and war. The shadowed glade filled out with delight, and whilst the fires flickered and smoked, the stars above glittered as though attendants at a holy ceremony.

Flamgrid glowed with what might be called 'a holy light', and Balwone felt his heart lift. He knew that his spirit was now irretrievably knit with that of the cobbler, the child of that ancient tribe which had ever been a keeper of the truth. He knew this wise man would induct him into all the wisdom he needed to know, and he lay back, listening to music and song, contented in his heart from the warm assurance that had come to him—the certainty that his destiny somehow lay in this leafy glade, and in the depths of the mind and spirit of the gentle cobbler.

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During the night, Facius had a terrible seizure.

The three men had talked late, and so much so that all the others had drifted off into sleep. Even the hounds had lain quiet, their heads upon their paws, looking sleepily into the fire, but refusing to stir. Without doubt a peace—almost supernatural in its quality—had descended upon all. Facius, Flamgrid and Balwone had talked quietly until their voices were little above a murmur, but the content of their discussion was like nectar to each man. The three had drunk deeply, slipping into thoughtful reverie, but not wanting to miss the thoughts one another let slip into the conversation.

For a moment in which was heavy prescience, the youngest of the three looked into the dark forest—its outside lit by the glow-ing fire, and inside, the mystery of hidden deeps in firs and deo-dars and ancient oaks. Creatures moved and rustled, and night birds gave off their appropriately mournful cries.

As Balwone looked at his father and at Flamgrid, it seemed they faded from sight and he was beholding a great mountain, one which rose out of a deep forest, and a brilliant light glowed from its high peak. He thought he saw a man of great beauty seated upon something, and that something appeared to be in the form of a large golden egg. He tried to penetrate the meaning of

the mountain, the man and the egg, but it remained a mystery to him. He saw himself approach the mountain, and found that its glory was awesome, and that he had to fight a pressure against him which sought to prevent him from entering the holy region. He—for his part—refused to desist for another great power was urging him on.

Suddenly he heard the groaning of his father, and as he turned, the vision faded. Something like anger rose up within him that Facius had destroyed the vision which, to him, was of the greatest importance. Quickly, however, he recovered from his momentary surge of anger and rushed across to his father, for the man had collapsed, rolling off the log on which he had been seated, and he was writhing on the grass of the glade.

Flamgrid was instantly at his side, and he turned the knight's head so that he could see his face in the light of the fire. He rose quickly and went into his hut where a tallow-light was burning. He moved amongst the medicines of his shelf, and brought out some powder which he dissolved into a drinking vessel, stirring it. This he held to Facius's lips, and with difficulty the two men were able to help the knight drink the potion.

He seemed to gain some relief from his deep pain, and looked up gratefully at Flamgrid. Then he said in a whisper, 'This is the hour, my dear friend.' He looked at Balwone, whose eyes were filled with tears of pity. 'It is my last hour, Balwone, my son. It is the beginning of your great hour, the hour which was always destined to come upon the world.'

To this Flamgrid nodded, but his eyes were also filled with tears, and his fair locks had fallen about his face. He persuaded Facius to drink a little more, and both men let the knight's head be pillowed upon their hands. Facius's gaze moved backwards and forwards to his son and the cobbler, and he nodded, as though he had sealed some agreement, and after this the light died from his eyes and he was gone from them.

Others had heard the cries of pain and had awakened. The eyes of the great hounds seemed like liquid pools of sorrow, and they moved with whimpers about the glade. Something of a supernatural silence seemed to descend over all. It was like the quietude of a supernal worship.

Then the weeping began. At first it was silent, as though an awe had gripped the whole retinue of the knight, but the awe departed and the soldiers and squires began to wail. In the midst of it Balwone wept silently, and the flaxen-haired cobbler kept himself bent over his old friend, caressing the now cold face, and giving out silent prayer for the spirit of the man who had gone beyond him. He thought in a moment that the love Balwone had spoken of was indeed the love the three men had known in their conversation and in their yearning for a world which would, one day, know only peace.

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Early in the morning, the men made a bier from the forest trees, and covered it with leaves and cloths, and laid the great knight upon it. They prepared for the return to the kingdom of Manignia, the people called the Manigs, and they knew there would be great mourning, not only at the castle but in the city of Magnion, the place near the castle called *Zagonholme* where Facius had lived with Merphein and Balwone.

For the most part their travel was silent, and this time they heard none following them in the background. Balwone followed the bier as though that were his primary place, but he knew the remains of his father were not the Facius he had known. He wondered where the spirit of the man of peace now dwelled. His mind was drawn beyond the line that separates this life from the next, and he pondered what memories he could—those learned of the ancients who had written about a Paradise to which true men and women go, and of a Tartarus where the spirits of dark-minded humans are forever enchained.

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At the castle he met his mother Merphein with tear-filled eyes, but she was calm and understanding. She had known it would happen, and she had been sure this was the way it would have to be. As they laid the remains of the old man upon a platform covered with rich purple brocade and covered him with fair linen,

she drew back the cloth to behold his face, and at that point she wept gently. Balwone thought wonderingly that his mother had never looked so beautiful and so peaceful, and he marvelled at her.

Even in the moment of looking it seemed the vision returned to him of the faraway mountain, and a figure seated upon a great golden object, but the man's face was hidden from him, and his spirit knew both an anger and an anguish as he tried to grasp the meaning of what he was seeing.

He was aroused out of the vision by his mother's strong and piercing look which was upon him. The vision dissipated, and a strange uneasiness seized him in his spirit. He turned away from her eyes.

She came to him and said, 'Now it is your time to go back to Flamgrid and learn the things that are necessary for your destiny.'

He protested. 'It is the time for me to stay and take up my father's work. I must watch over you and his people; I must serve Zagon as his true knight.'

She shook her head gently. 'No, Balwone. The hour of his death is the hour of your life. Otherwise how will it come to this world—that which you are designated to bring? This is your destiny and you must not betray it by the doing of lesser things, noble as they may be.'

When she said that, he remembered the last moment before his father had died, and knew it was the same message that Facius had given him. Even so, his mind kept protesting. It was as though beyond his time with Flamgrid another time would emerge, and the thought of it made him uneasy. The time beyond the time would be fraught with pain, and even horror; he sensed that even as he considered it, but the deep violet eyes of his mother were upon him, and he knew he could not escape what lay ahead of him.

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King Zagon seemed to have quietened from his robust and boisterous ways. It was as though he were maturing into a noble

monarch. He attended Merphein gently and with royal courtesy, and he saw her through the ceremony of the funeral rites and promised her that her estates would always remain inviolate. He listened to her discourse on the destiny of Balwone, and since the king saw no threat from the rise in wisdom of that young man, he agreed to make arrangements with the kings Gothroyd and Paelfric regarding the passage of the young man to Flamgrid. Gothroyd had often thought in political terms of the wedding of his daughter Gothlic with the son of Facius, for that man was of royal blood and the marriage would have been of advantage to both kingdoms. However, nothing was said of such an arrangement, and when the days of mourning were finished, Balwone prepared to make the journey across two other kingdoms to be with the cobbler.

This time he must go alone. Whilst he took his great steed, and whilst he was equipped with his armour, he used another horse to carry the equipment which would help him to be a pilgrim rather than a knight, a seeker rather than one who had been established in life.

It was with mixed feelings he bade farewell to his mother, but he knew she had given him the gifts of womanly understanding which had been hers, and that now these must mix with the wisdom of the cobbler, and all the sages who had given their riches to the human race. Henceforth he must be a man of peace as had been his father, but he even more so because of the Writings. In a strange way he might prove to be the first man to wed the wisdom of the Writings—all of which had been composed by men—with the wisdom of his mother. Whilst it was true that she was a reader of such writings, yet she had within her a deep spirit in which she had visions and intuitions that were not prompted nor bound by the thoughts and ideas of the sages. She—of all persons—knew the destiny of her son, a destiny which not even Facius had known in its fullness.

Not until he reached the forest paths did Balwone weep, and when his weeping was completed, unusual joy possessed him and so he went on his way as though the rites of death being completed, he had now passed into a life fuller than ever he had known. He was in no hurry to pass through Paelfric's kingdom

and enter that of Gothroyd. He was content to ride, sometimes dreaming as his head nodded in the solitude of the forest, and sometimes alert to the glories of the world about him—the songs of the birds and the azure of the sky which was as brilliant as the band across his own family shield, whilst the green late spring was gentle to his dreaming eyes. From time to time he saw the fawn of deer dash across his path, and sometimes the proud antlered bucks, who tossed their heads imperiously, sent silver streams from their nostrils and bounded majestically into the darkness of the forest. When some forest track would widen and the azure above him would appear, then he could see the regal sweep of a great eagle, or hear the cry of it from some lofty eyrie.

In all this his soul was contented, but he used the hours to meditate. His clear mind could repeat the sayings of the great ones, but he also had the gift of critical thinking, and he would search out what he thought were the weaknesses in argued wisdom and discursive reasoning. Often he reserved questions to be asked of his new master, Flamgrid.

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When he entered Zed he kept away from Gothric, the royal city of that kingdom, and so one day was surprised to look up and see a noblewoman, attended by a strong escort of knights and squires and other servants. He halted, drew aside the horse that carried his supplies, and bowed from the waist to the lady.

She for her part halted the escort and asked him why he was travelling through the kingdom. He showed her the parchments which were his warrant, and she glanced at them lightly. Suddenly she seemed to be arrested by the name she read, and she looked up at him earnestly.

‘You are Balwone, son of Facius and of Merphein,’ she said. Only her royal dignity prevented her from showing more surprise.

When he nodded silently, she went on, ‘My father has often told me about you, and your martial prowess, and the wise father who was once yours, but has now gone to be with his fore-fathers.’

She paused. ‘I have also heard of your mother who is known as one of the wisest of women.’ She lapsed into silence, perhaps because Balwone was gazing at her beauty as a man who is struck by something new but cannot absorb what he is seeing. This was no new experience for her, but she coloured slightly.

‘My mother is indeed wise,’ he said wonderingly. ‘Wise in ways that are not often found these days amongst women even so noble. Generally it is the aged women who deal in things supernatural, who claim to have such wisdom, but my mother seems to have that kind of wisdom which comes naturally to her, out of the depths of her womanhood.’

The laughter of the Princess Gothlic—for it was she—came in silver trills, and it was now the turn of Balwone to blush, for he heard the scorn in her merriment.

‘Why should it seem strange to you that a woman should have natural wisdom?’ Her laughter was less scornful, and more gay. ‘Is it not a thing given to all women, and is it not that men are so occupied with the gaining of wisdom that they pass this given wisdom by?’

Balwone nodded gravely. ‘That is a fault which I do not think belongs to me. I have long ago recognised that men and women think differently. I can only follow the ways of my own gender and be aided by the sages, but I am grateful for that wisdom which you call natural, for my mother has taught me such.’

Both knew in that moment that some gift of intimate affinity had been given to them. Neither recognised it as love, or thought of it as such, but they knew themselves to be of one mind when it came to seeing the human race as worthy of love, and perhaps being made truly worthy through the gift of love. He wondered at the singular beauty of the royal lady, whilst she thought of him as the quietest and most noble man she had ever met—even beyond her own father, whom she greatly respected and wholly adored.

Suddenly she seemed to realise that she had acted rather much out of royal protocol. She could sense the tension those of her retinue were feeling, and she nodded imperiously to the noble pilgrim, touched her mount slightly, and began to move forwards. He was caught unawares that she wished to put some distance between him and herself, and he followed her

movements with wonder, as she gathered about herself her knights and squires and moved forward.

In spite of herself she cast a backward glance and found him watching her, and then bowing to her in acknowledgment of their meeting. The sun seemed to blaze overhead as she departed, and he lost sight of her in a spiral of red light that burned into his eyes and hid her from him. As he proceeded towards the place of the cobbler it seemed that the insects hummed a strong new song, that within him something vibrated that hitherto had not been set free to so resonate.

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Flamgrid was waiting for him. And well it was, for the sun was descending lower over the great groves of deodars and oaks, and its light blazed between the green bowers of willows, splashing onto the surface of the stream that ran by the sage's place. Balwone saw the man clad in forest green darting hither and thither, doing this and that, in anticipation of hosting the famous son of his old friend, Facius. Balwone could smell the appetising fragrance of boiled deer with vegetables, and his body longed for comfort and his stomach for fullness.

He loosed himself from his stirrups, to which his mailed footwear had clung firmly. Now he was freed, had alighted and was moving forward to clasp his friend. Flamgrid had not expected such intimacy, but found himself hugging the great form of the armoured pilgrim. Soon Balwone was freed of his metal, and clad in light summer linen, ready to shout and clap his hands, as though here were liberty he had not previously known, not even in his childhood.

The westering sun had all but hidden itself by the time they sat down to eat. Venison stew was sweet to the mouth and filling to the belly, and the two men ate and burped, and finally lay back along the great mossed logs and looked up at a sky which was of a deep blue, merging into the near black of the night.

Flamgrid pointed to a new booth or hut, or whatever it was deemed to be. It had been built for the young knight. Close to it was a rude stable for his two horses with hay strewn on the floor

for fodder and for comfort. He was moved by the preparations of his host, but Flamgrid seemed to count them but nothing. He shook his flaxen hair in delight and waived off the gratitude.

'Tonight,' he said, 'we will indulge ourselves in cider and much conversation, but tomorrow we will begin the Writings together. Wisdom comes often when men talk out that which is hidden within them, even beyond the immediate knowledge of the mind.'

They talked far into the night. Sometimes the horses would stamp their hooves to keep the circulation of their system in motion. Night animals and birds cried—calls mating and calls warning—but it was a time of peace for the two men. Well after midnight Balwone staggered his way to the new booth and, with only a blanket to cover him, slept until the dawn broke into his hut and awakened him.

The cobbler had laid aside his tools on the bench and he was preparing some forest bread, flat and spiced, and his famous herbal fluid stood steaming in two huge pewter mugs. The men sat at the bench and broke their fast. As Balwone drank the tasty liquid, his weariness from travel and the late night departed, and joy began to sparkle like the new sun where it struck the globules of moisture on the trees, and fell athwart the green sward, bringing amethyst diamonds from its dew drops. The air was opalescent, glowing with soft light, and he breathed in a new kind of freedom. Indeed, he wondered whether he had known such freedom in all his previous years. He had ever been under nurses, servants, tutors, game-masters and the protocol of chivalry and aristocracy. From the moment he had dismounted after his arrival he knew himself to be in another world.

After the meal they washed their utensils in the running stream, and the cobbler cleared his bench of all its cured hides and equipment. The peculiar astringent smell of leather, strong and biting, was still there, but now Flamgrid dragged out his great trunk of parchments. There was a huge hasp of wrought iron, and a great lock that opened easily to its enormous key.

There, then, on the bench, were the first of the old Writings that Flamgrid had gathered—first in order of writing, though not in order of collecting. Part of his rustic scholarship had been

formed out of questioning travellers who themselves were sages, masters of manuscripts, trained in the great places of learning, and moving from college to college, abbey to abbey, sometimes going through the old lands of the East and sometimes finding a hermit here and there who treasured the possession of an unusual manuscript, and whose life was given to poring over it. In this way sellers of parchments had made their fortunes, but some, being charlatans, had misled scholars for centuries with forged documents. Flamgrid, as was said earlier, had the strange ability or gift to sift a writing almost at a glance. No document could easily deceive him.

Both had confidence, then, in the documents they called the 'Writings'. As they began to pore over them Balwone found himself astonished at the fertility of the cobbler's mind. His ideas flowed like the stream beside their grove, and his fluidity of speech kept the knight battling to keep up with the output of the now middle-aged but self-taught scholar. Flamgrid would keep riffling through his manuscripts until he would find the required one, and each he could recognise by its shade of colour and its kind of calligraphy.

Gradually something began to emerge, but not before noon had passed without eating or drinking. Indeed, it was in the late afternoon when the cobbler drew breath, and he took the knight with him to the limpid stream, where they dipped in their pewter mugs and drank its sweet water. Some of the spiced bread from breakfast still lay on a shelf in Flamgrid's main room. They tore at it, chewed it, and—almost resenting the time taken out—they went back to the parchment-laden bench and continued their quest.

In the evening they relaxed, drinking from mugs filled with cider, and eating strips of venison that had been laid across the hot coals. After the evening meal they stretched out on deer-skins before the fire, and Flamgrid took Balwone through the materials they had read during the day. He fired question after question, to help his pupil grasp the secrets which are hidden to most mortals.

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Days passed upon days, weeks upon weeks, months upon months. Both men grew lean and dry-eyed. Only when it seemed they could bear it no longer, they would take their weapons—bows, arrows, sharpened knives, slings and even a hunting spear—and they would make their way into the forest. They hunted deer, and hares; they speared fish and gutted them. They some-times heard the whirring of the pheasants, but these Flamgrid never took. The unspoken agreement with his own king was that these be left for the royal hunt. Foxes they saw come and go, and they knew the lairs of other creatures.

Once they had a dangerous skirmish with a herd of pigs. These were scattered under the great forest oaks, snuff-ling through the thickly piled leaves, searching for truffles, and when they smelt them they would dig, foraging out the delightful delicacies. Seeing their actions, the two men set up a hul-labaloo and at first the pigs scooted away, their arched backs giving them great impetus and speed, but then they turned and raced towards their tormentors. The two men knew their lives were forfeit, and they scrambled up an oak whose sloping trunk made access easy, but then the pigs, slavering at their mouths and uttering murderous cries, began pulling themselves along the same trunk. The men leapt to another tree, their bows hanging at an angle to their shoulders, and their quivers rattling with the arrows.

After a time the pigs quietened their angry squealing and began to grunt as once again they sought truffles on the forest floor. The men knew the animals kept backward glances on their two foes in the trees. They were edging away from the cobbler and the knight when Flamgrid took aim and pierced a sow behind the right ear. It dropped to the ground, and the oinking of the other beasts began afresh. They began to withdraw, eyeing the men in the trees, but this time Balwone drew his bow, and another beast was felled. The swine sniffed their dead fellow creatures and then trotted off.

After the hunts the men would skin and clean and strip their victims, and carry the offal deeply into the forest where they would dump it. Even in the distance they could hear the cries of the predators fighting amongst themselves. Feral animals would

soon cleanse the royal forest, so that the occasional ranger who came their way had no grounds for complaining.

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The breaks from study were a help to the knight. He suspected that the cobbler was giving him time to digest the rich and profitable material they were investigating. At night, alone in his own booth, Balwone found something strange was happening in his own mind. Thoughts were knitting with thoughts. The material was becoming more and more co-ordinated. Flashes of understanding would come without the cobbler's promptings. The son of Facius was catching up to his father, and somehow the spirit of his mother, Merphein, was with him, so that he could overleap much of the logic the cobbler was seeking to instil in him.

One night he thought he had brought his mind to utter confusion. In vision all he could see was darkness and chaos, and somehow it billowed out to the extremities of his mind and spirit, and he despaired. It was as though he were being drawn into the dark void of the anarchy, and he felt himself falling. He cried out, but it must have been silently. If it were not, then the cobbler was deliberately leaving him to his own devices. Suddenly a bright bird, all silvered and smoking with glory, came fluttering across the void, and immediately the matter became rational to him—though why and how he knew not—and peace blew into his spirit as though by a strong wind, and he was calmed.

More and more these visions came, and more and more Flamgrid pressed up against his mind and spirit with new ideas, fresh thoughts, novel views and rich understandings. The more this happened, the more the knight dreaded the coming night. Then came the night of nights when he seemed not to be upon his bed, but out in the grove, and yet it was not the cobbler's grove, but some strange glade in a distant forest. He could see the mountain which had now become a living myth in his mind, and he could see the dawn breaking behind the mountain, but here, as he turned his head, he knew he was being confronted by a creature so horrid that his senses could not comprehend it all at once.

There, in the centre of the clearing, stood a great dragon. The lower part of its body was heavy, as substantial as a great

elephant and sturdy as a giant bear, but it tapered to its head, which was held aloft, smoking, and at times flashing fire from its nostrils. All the time its arms and paws were uplifted as though to strike. It raged before the helpless knight, who could only gaze at it in wonder. Once it seemed to rush upon him, but when he drew his sword it retreated, as though in momentary fear. Then from its nostrils issued shafts of fire that seemed to reach him, bursting out in rolling flames and white smoke that stank of sulphur and dank bodily odours.

The creature gave forth a hideous cry and rushed upon him, but he awoke and the smell of brimstone was still in the air, and his night attire and blankets were soaked with the sweat of fear. His first impulse was to rush into the cobbler's room, but he resisted that, lying back in the heat of the clothes, and closing his eyes to shut out the thing he had seen. Shutting his eyes did make some difference. Now he saw no dragon, but the distant mountain only, and then it seemed to draw closer and closer to him, and when it arrived near to him he saw the figure of a man, black against the coming dawn. The man had some wonderful glory breaking about him in shafts of light that flashed outwards and were lost. Gradually the dawn came, and the mountain faded, as though into covering mists, and he found himself alone in a vast wide cavern of time and space, and his spirit first felt to be alone, and then terribly, dreadfully lonely. Again he wanted to go to his cobbler-teacher, but he desisted, for somehow he knew he had to bear this vision and revelation himself—in his own spirit.

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He did talk to his teacher, and the eyes of the cobbler gleamed. 'At last!' he cried. 'At last the Writings are coming true!'

He saw that the knight did not understand. There was puzzlement in the noble's eyes. The night had been too terrible to reduce to a discussion related to the manuscripts.

'You see!' Flamgrid cried. 'Words are not just words. They are the utterances of the great ones. They are the wisdom of the One who made the universe. These words he has given to his servants to hear, and to act upon. It matters not how ancient they

are, nor to what generation they were uttered. They are the treasures of the entire human race. They are light for men when they walk in darkness, and even more light for those who already walk in light. They are solace for the pain-stricken, the wounded and the bereaved. They are the medicine that heals the spirits that are stricken by the horror and the depravity of this world.'

He looked afresh at Balwone and said in a whisper, 'It is impossible that the prophecies should not be fulfilled. The sages have awaited an hour such as this, and a special destiny has been laid upon you.'

His saying both delighted and terrified the young knight. It also mystified him.

'I have ever been sure of some special destiny, but I have no sense that its fulfilment is close in time or act.'

Flamgrid agreed. 'As yet you are not ready. You must know more of the Writings, and—even more—you must go out and live where men and women and young children live. You must be part of their life. You must live where they live, and must enter into an understanding of their evil, their impurity, their conflicts and their sufferings. Without this you will be a knight on some noble exploit, yet lack the sympathy and understanding which will make you part of the great Massia—the Intention of the Great Maker, the Most High.'

The knight felt some flame had ignited in his blood, and he cried passionately, 'Then let us get to the Writings! Let us not spare ourselves! Let us look more to the Intention and hear yet more of the great Massia—forever blessed be his name!'

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Renewed in passion, both men worked night and day, pondering and contemplating the sacred words. Sometimes Flamgrid would disappear into the forest, taking with him some of the Writings, and not reappearing for days. Balwone was himself beginning to understand and interpret many of the chronicles and the wisdom of the ancient sages. His pulses quickened, his blood was fired, and he could feel heat in his bones. When he would desist because of a sudden physical hunger or bodily need,

he would hurry to fulfil the need and then return to avidly interpret what lay before him.

Sometimes his mind would be freed from these strange manuscripts, and he would sit at the cobbler's bench, staring into the darkness of the forest. Close to him would be the sounds of nature in its liberty—the songs of feathered creatures, the rustling penetrations into the glade of forest animals, and the incessant singing of insects. Often huge butterflies floated past, or stopped to drink nectar from the flowers of the great trees and the humble shrubs, and then his spirit seemed almost to inhabit the things about him—flora and fauna, earth and sky, the past, the present and the future. With mounting joy and terror he sensed increasingly the future that had been planned for him—'the Intention', as Flamgrid had named it.

Both enjoyed the presence of each other, especially the humour and laughter. For testing and joy they would often wrestle one another in the cobbler's grove. Each was aware of the great strength of the other, but their wrestling was not mere play. It was part of the training essential to the knight, and he was grateful for it. The cobbler would often send him away to hone up the skills of combat, the science of war, with a view to the conflict which was going to be his. Often, also, Flamgrid would see the sadness and homesickness in the eyes of the younger man, and he would tease him back into their present purpose, so that soon both would be lost again in the Writings, their spirits fired by the strange predictions and extraordinary wisdom of the ancients.

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From time to time Balwone would be visited by the savage and boisterous dragon who would suddenly appear in the grassy glade. Most often it would be when Flamgrid had gone into a secret place to wrestle with the Writings, or even to hunt food for them both. Long before the cobbler would appear with his laden sled, the mythical beast would stand astride the forest grove, his head high above the small trees and towering towards the height

of the forest giants. His distended nostrils would give off the loathsome smell of brimstone, and the frightening roar would first be a rumbling in the belly, until it became a terrible bellow, mixed with sulphurous fire.

The heat and the noise, the rage in the eyes of the creature and the terrible countenance of the monster at first made Balwone tremble with fear, but one day he came across a statement in the Writings, which told him,

*There be no such creatures as dragons and strange giants. The Master of the Universe made no such things, for it was not in him to create what is fearsome and unlovely. These strange beings are also not the figments of our fevered imaginations. They are the beasts we bring to life out of our spirits and out of the evil that resides in our secret hearts.*

*Nor are they made by one man or of one person alone. The human race devises their form and their disposition out of the collective spirit of its evil. Were there no such creatures devised by human myths, then the pain of the mind and the spirit of a person would send that one into insanity. It is a mercy—allowed by the Maker—to bring out the stuff of evil and cause it to become visible in the forms the imagination and the will would have it be. In this way man is confronted with himself and his own terrible evil.*

Time and again Balwone would search for such statements throughout the Writings, and often he and Flamgrid would speak of it through the night, their own selves being surrounded by these terrifying beasts until the dawn broke through to them, at which time creatures faded into the fastnesses of the forest, and both men would make merry with their spiced bread or some other provender taken out of the hoards of the competent cobbler.

When it came time for cobbling—when the work had mounted up—Flamgrid would send the knight off into the forest to hunt or to learn the lore of the creatures. When the nobleman would desire to take a manuscript or two, the cobbler would forbid him.

‘Study is a good thing for the mind, but times are when a student must make merry with life. He must understand the world

about him so that he may know the world within him. The gut of the mind desires to digest the hard foods given to it. As some animals chew the cud, so must a man ruminate on what his belly has taken in.’

With such sayings he would send the young baron off, and that one would return with his mind fired more than ever with the truth, and eager to study afresh.

On one of these occasions he met Gothlic’s entourage on a forest road, and he drew back, fearing the encounter. He knew his own clothing to be rude and primitive. By contrast the princess seemed to him to be a creature out of some beautiful paradise, and he scarcely dared gaze upon her.

For her part, she saw a man whose clothes were those of a serf, a cobbler, a forest-dweller, but the eyes were the eyes of a dreamer, a mystic, a saint. For all those things, they were not fierce but gentle, not subservient but burning with a strong fire of passion. She saw there was no arrogance in the man, and no lust, and the knowledge made her tremble within herself. She greatly desired to know him intimately and yet, at the same time, she feared such intercourse of personalities.

Outwardly she was scornful and imperious. She scarcely knew why she used the words she did, but she cried, ‘So our noble knight has become a peasant! His are the hands of a cobbler or some such! The forest-dweller has become uncouth and has forgotten the high ways of the court and of converse with kings and noble people.’

Each taunt brought flicks of pain to the ill-clad pupil of the cobbler, but he gazed at her steadfastly, and the knights and soldiers of the royal retinue saw a man of royalty and majesty who belied his forest cladding. They knew the princess enough to know that she was deliberately goading the pilgrim knight.

She did not succeed.

He bowed, smilingly, and said, ‘Such is the sweet cost of true learning. Truth is the gift of the Most High, but his demands are those beyond royal courts, and the kingdoms of Man.’

She found no offence in his words, and with a slight nod, gripped the reins of her steed, and urged it on. The men of the court stared approvingly at him as they passed, but the fragrance

of the woman and her fine beauty played more havoc with the spirit of Balwone than could the most threatening of dragons. Often in the nights he would have to wrestle with beauty that gripped at his heart, almost turned his mind, and battled with him more than any lust that might vagrantly visit him. The words of the Writings would often fade as he studied, and the beautiful eyes and the noble spirit of the princess would confront him as though present. This one was more imperious than the fiery portents of the sagacious prophets. He learned not to fight this battle, but to let it be, to allow it to lie dormant in the dark and hidden reaches of his own spirit. One day it would gather strength to become a dragon of itself, or to be a royal invitation to some special paradise. He knew not: he dared not think about it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Human, Celestial and Devilish Creatures

One day as they were studying their writings together, Flamgrid suddenly threw up his arms and shouted, 'This is the day! This is the true time! This is when the servant of Massia must go out into the world of all creatures!'

Balwone saw that the cobbler's eyes were burning. Indeed, their soft and gentle turquoise had turned almost to liquid-blue fire. They flashed their burning at Balwone, and he knew he was the object of Flamgrid's present revelation, so much so that the man could not withhold his passion.

'You must go!' said the cobbler. 'You must go, now! You must gather your garments of poverty, store your armour for a time, and you must go on the second stage of your journey. You must live where those of the human race live, and you must feel and know their pains, their evil and their glories. From them you must now learn. The Writings are in your head, and such writings as pertain to you, you may take with you, but from now on you will have no mentor other than those who come from the Most High, or who are the emissaries of the ancient dragon—his dragons and their ilk.'

Balwone indeed wondered at the sudden change in his teacher and friend, but he knew some power greater than the mild cobbler was turning his time into destiny. Something, too, had changed in the Writings. Whereas before they had been fascinating materials to study, to contemplate, and about which to argue and discuss, now there seemed a directness in them that was strongly disconcerting. As the knight riffled through them to select those which he thought were relevant to him, and as

Flamgrid helped him—as though he were anxious to send his companion on his way quickly—it seemed almost that light darted from the script, that words almost arose on the page to dance, or to form themselves into songs and psalms and melo-dies, as though they should, or would, be sung. They seemed to penetrate into the mind of Balwone, giving him great and immedi-ate comprehension of their meanings.

He had loved the study, the interminable discussion, the pen-etration into the minds of the writers, and—beyond the writers—the Writer. Now there was a solemnity, a high standing, a communication that was immediate and direct, and almost urgent. Yet there was nothing of panic, nothing of nervous pressure, no restlessness of spirit which came to the two men. The thought of ‘fate’ was never in their minds, but the reality of ‘destiny’ hovered through the words, above them and beyond them, and like finely tuned instruments the prophetic brothers resonated with delight and awe and immediate life.

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That night Balwone found it difficult to sleep. In the distance he could hear the roarings and thunders of the dragons, the sounds of a senseless melee, the groanings of creatures that seemed to be in their death throes yet which recovered and began their threatenings, and their burnings, as though they would destroy the knight and the night. Often their sounds died and, in their place, came singing that was without words, and music that was unearthly, the flowing of celestial creatures towards this mundane world, making it rise beyond its ordinary levels so that healing could come to the whole race, and the eyes of men and women be brightened. There was the rising of a great Sun, and dark shad-ows were feeling defeated by some new era or aeon that was coming into its own.

For Balwone the night was a time of deep restlessness. The exchange of the frightening, the awesome, the dark and the lightsome, the agony and the delight—these all enervated him, but when he awoke his body seemed urgent, pressing for quick departure.

They ate their spiced bread and drank mead, although it was but early morning. They saw the sun arise, his red rays flashing through the great leafy branches, and setting the glade alight with a golden glow that made the grass tender, and blues and yellows of the flowers to be as supernal, whilst the air was light and opalescent, and the choristers of birds and the background chorus of the forest creatures were a concert of surprise and substantial joy.

The two horses in their booths neighed their surprise at the departure of the master. According to Flamgrid, Balwone was to hump a pack, use a staff and be as any peasant. No poor man would own a horse, and it was with some regret that the knight abandoned his two steeds. He had a sense that he would return one day, take up his armour, equip his horses and be away on a journey different from his present one. It was only a presentiment, but Flamgrid nodded absently at the thought, as though it had ever been in his mind, but first the preliminary work of the new prophet must begin.

The sun was high in the heavens when the knight, who was now a peasant—a commoner in dress and appearance—made his departure. He and Flamgrid had resolved there should be no sentimental parting—nothing that would weaken their resolves to obey the Word that had come through the Writings. It was as though the Maker of the worlds had himself spoken, and must not be gainsaid. Nothing less than death should alter their course.

As he left, Balwone noticed that the manuscripts had been returned to their trunk, the tools of the cobbler’s trade were laid out on the bench and the leathers and chamois were set out in a pile. For his part, the knight carried a roll of bedding; flasks of fluid; herbs and medicines; in his pouch a few coins; and in his wallet the precious manuscripts he had chosen to take with him. He had no weapons save the knife in his belt, but that was for hunting food or preparing it for a meal. His clothes were not ragged but they were faded. They were of a green that blended with the forest. He wore stout footwear—the best the cobbler could manufacture—and light moccasins were in his pack, should he be invited into homes.

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Both men felt the freedom that came from each other's breaking of a long and arduous union. There was a freshening of the spirits of both, as though one could not hold the other to the task they needed to have in hand. With some relief Flamgrid tooled his leather with the sharp knife, holed it with his awl and sewed it with the smooth iron needles. He was filled with joy, but none of it was unrelated to the mission of his friend.

That friend was exulting in the sheer joy of freedom: his passage through the forest; his crossing of fields and pastures; his hesitating beside brooks and rivers; his crossing of waterways where the flow of them chuckled over stones and crags and glinted in the sun so that pearls and diamonds gleamed and shone and flashed in his eyes, capturing for moments the sun and then letting it go, until it freshly bejewelled the laughing waters.

The songs of birds seemed new, and indeed he met families of birds and animals he had not hitherto known. Eyes gleamed at him from behind bushes, rabbits skittered away at his coming, the fawns leapt with delight and fright so that their scattering was in the dancing mode and kept his heart lilting with joy.

The first night was not lonely, though he was alone. He knew by now how to doss down, how to drink the water of the stream or tincture it with the powdered herbs. He felt no need to boil or roast the tough dried strips of venison and bacon. He knew how to roll himself in a blanket, out of the way of the dew that might come. Replete with food and thought, he stared up at the black velvet of the moonless night. He knew the stars held a mystery, but this he had never cared to understand. His assurance was that all that happened was from the Master—the Most High. He knew of other gods and men who purported to discern the times, pre-dict future happenings and read the portents for each new day, but the Writings had spoken of a will beyond that, and in that conviction he was, in some protective and warming way, cocooned.

This night there were no thunderings of dragonian beasts nor the smooth slitherings of deceitful creatures. Not even joy and delight visited him. Only a gentle peace wrapped him into sleep and forgetfulness, and when he awoke in the dawn, he wondered whether he had ever known such tranquillity.

He explained joyfully to himself, 'It is the will! It is the will!' This was the last thing he had learned from the wise cobbler, and he kept it in mind, resolving never to be other than in the will of the One who directed his life and destiny.

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So began five whole years of wanderings. Sometimes he would be invited into the houses of sturdy yeoman who would have outfitted him with sturdier and less rude clothing. Some would have given him charge of their farms or their businesses. They sensed his alert and brilliant mind, and his power to order things well. Others were suspicious of him. Many were the times when he was followed by footpads, and mean thieves, but they knew he carried no money to speak of and no goods that they would have coveted other, perhaps, than his clothes and his wallet of secret documents. It is true they did not know the value and nature of the parchments, but when they saw him reading they despised him or felt angrily inferior.

For the most part, however, life in the first two years had little pain to it and scarcely any suffering. It was a mild observing of the affairs of men and women, but then it seemed special insight was given to him—beyond even that which he had possessed before—and he began to understand the swell and rise of mortal ambition, the dark tides of human evil, hatred and cynicism. He sensed the quivering anger of man and burning bitterness of those who had been wounded in their spirits, demeaned in their characters and despised by others who had triumphed over them.

At first he sought to work on the principle of justice—to equal out the lot of others. Here some had suffered ignominy at the hands of others in authority or had been betrayed by those whom they had trusted. So the variety of evils presented themselves and he sought to level out the sufferings of his new friends, but in this he found himself powerless.

Gradually these evils began to impress themselves upon his spirit. He felt that in trying to lift burdens for others, he was taking them upon himself. At such times he would have recourse to the

writings of the sages and the prophets, and they indeed comforted him somewhat. Yet he found no immediate answer to the human dilemma—that of amazing goodness, and frightening evil, often to be found in the same person.

He knew the only resources he had were of the spirit—his spirit, and the life that the other Spirit fed into his. In one way this was all nebulous; in another, it was the most substantial thing of all. He found he could comfort the bereaved. He could speak common sense to the morbid, and free them to some degree from their gloom and grimness. Children who had been shocked by some happenings could recover and live afresh in their unsullied laughter. The infirm used to look at him with eager eyes, as though somehow he could help, but seemed dismayed when he urged them to accept their lot. Perhaps, best of all, he could encourage the sages who had lost heart or were beginning to desert the wisdom for which they had been chosen to be in this world. How heartened they would become when he would quote the wise men and women of former ages, and how pertinent those words seemed to be to their own times and situations!

Gradually, however, his peace and joy seemed to be deserting him. Situation after situation seemed to settle on him as a burden, as a problem without a solution. He ached in his heart for the circumstances and environments which pressed men down into excessive sorrow and excruciating suffering. He would see shadows come into the eyes of the hurt and the wounded, and he longed for a power to heal and liberate them.

At these times his moods changed and his spirit seemed to darken. Away in the distance—within his dreams—he could hear the first mutterings of noises as when a storm begins its thunderings, rolling across the land with lowering clouds, and then giving off lightnings, but at such a distance as not to threaten the watching ones. At such times he thought the heavy mutterings were like a phalanx of dragons making their way over distant mountains, moving relentlessly to where he was, intent on dismaying him, bringing fear to him as though they hoped to destroy his spirit and waste the high thoughts of his mind. It was as though a sudden and abrupt killing of him would bring them no lasting satisfaction or delight. They wanted him to waste

away—the victim of attrition—as though that would prove that the Great One who had made all things, and his Massia Messenger, were of no account. Balwone's humiliation would be the vindication of their evil powers and a warning to all who tried to destroy ruling celestials which, having been created, now purposed to defy their Maker and to rule all his domains.

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Although Balwone knew it not, his strength of character was growing, even when he was most disheartened by what he saw of the contradiction of human nature. He would see such tenderness in mothers, such fortitude and protective energy in fathers, such guilelessness in some children and such chivalry in men, young and old, whilst the beauty of romance seemed to tell him that the best in life can obtain where love is the ruling passion.

Against this he would see envy and jealousy rear their heads, even where love seemed to be at its deepest. Bitter, black hatred would suddenly break out in forms of murder—human persons as slayers of mothers and of fathers, of brothers and sisters, and also of little children. His gorge rose, and he gagged at such happenings. He saw the cruelty human beings exercise towards one another, and the selfishness which destroys the love which once had conquered. As for the constant warring of tribe against tribe, people against people, nation against nation and, even worse, civil-warring that set brother against brother, father against son, and set up perpetual feuding within clans and between clans—these he could not bear. Such terrible actions drove him to despair, and then with despair came the acids of cynicism, and the deepest anger of all—that against the One who had created the human race.

All of these experiences sent him back to the Writings, and only they seemed competent to calm him. He could constantly hear the voice of Flamgrid who would counsel him as to the strange power of suffering to change men and transform them powerfully into becoming—and remaining—as different people. It was with joy he would see the tenderness of a mother, the

beauty of a young woman, the nobility of a young man and the wisdom of the old—both women and men.

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One night he had a dream, and in that dream came one whom he could not see, but whose voice was strong whilst gentle, peaceful whilst filled with great power, encouraging whilst it even spoke of a suffering the young noble had never experienced.

The voice said, 'Now you will become as other human beings. You will know what they know, for you will do what they do. Often your anger is for what you believe that you as a man should do, but yet could never do. You are angry at human beings for their weaknesses, where you as a person would be strong, and not weak—as they are. Yet your view of mankind is as from some lofty eyrie from which the eagle looks down with fierce and piercing eye, missing nothing, but it is intent on only part of it—that on which it swoops for its prey. Its eye does not see all when it is intent only on that prey. This is how you have been. Even your simplicity of garb and your hardy way of life is bringing you to scorn and contempt for human flesh, especially flesh that does not go out of its way to come under the true wisdom. So you pride yourself on yourself. You are seeking wisdom and truth and they are not. So you see yourself above your fellows, and such thinking is fatal. Soon you will be cynical of all but yourself. This is not the true wisdom.'

Balwone trembled at the voice, for its words were like sharp darts piercing his mind and troubling his conscience. Into his belly came a rotteness that bid fair to unseat his being and to cast him down into the dust of his own thinking. Misgivings concerning himself gripped him like a seizure of rigours, and a bile of horror was a gorge rising within him.

With pain he cried out, 'Great One, who thus speaks to me, let me have my say. Let me plead my case. From childhood I have known of Thy Presence. I have not understood, but I have sensed the Presence that is always and that is everywhere, and night and day Thou hast been in my brain, in my heart, in my spirit. Never have I been able to escape Thee. Nor hast Thou left

me a moment to seek peace within myself, or to live alone in my own mind and by my natural personal powers. So, then, my thoughts have been of Thee and not of myself. It is now Thou dost tell me that I have done wrong, and that I am wrong. I pray Thee, be gentle, and tell me where my faults lie and why, and I will right them and I will please Thee and Thee alone.'

As the knight finished his prayer, there arose a vision of Facius and Merphein, and he saw the gentle face of his father, the humble frame and mien of the quiet knight of Zagon, and tears started from his eyes. It was as though Facius knew of a humility he had not yet known, and as he wept his mother appeared, her calm face set in noble tranquillity. Her deep violet eyes looked into the depths of him with love and pity. As he viewed her with adoration, he saw movements deeply within her gaze, as though their meeting with him troubled her. As her pity grew, so did alarm within him. As men who have unconsciously done wrong know not how to find the evil they had not suspected was in them, so Balwone was further filled with alarm and misgivings. It was in this state that the Voice spoke again, and the knight noted that there was nothing in it of condemnation or harshness. Nevertheless, it was the cause of horror within and dread without, and his heart seemed perilously empty and his spirit to be in a wide, dry and sterile land.

'Evil has great deceit,' said the Voice. 'Men hear its voice, and the worst becomes the best to them. The best deludes them into living in the worst. High ideals make cruel the minds of those who plot righteousness. Humility also can delude one into think-ing that goodness is native to her or to him. To be high-spirited and high-minded may bring a person to the death which is pride. For a man to be great of himself is to make him believe that he is for others, when—in deadly ways—he is but for himself. This the sages have learned, and against this the prophets have always warned. To become great is to be humbled. To be humbled is to die in the heart of oneself that one might live again as another.'

'But the Presence, the Presence!' cried Balwone. 'Is that not proof that Thou art near, that Thou dost approve, and that Thou dost show the Will, the Will that is the true way of the world and all its events?'

‘The Presence is ever near all who are human,’ came the reply. ‘For some this Presence is the balm and bane of true living. Peace comes with the Presence. For others it is the spur to noble living and to that true loving which fills the mind with compassion for the lonely and the lost—those sentiments which do not merely remain in the mind and heart but work healing where it is needed. For yet others the Presence is a torment. As the sun shines on the frozen mire of the boglands, so does the Presence bring the thaw of evil until it bubbles and boils and devours strangers unawares. Had there been no Presence there would have been no Sun of holiness to unmask the evil of the heart and reveal its wastelands, and its treachery towards the blood from which it sprang and the flesh with which, by nature, it has affinity.’

Hearing these penetrating words, Balwone was lost as in a dark fog or a black mist, knowing not where he was going, scarcely able to feel himself to be. He was as a wraith in badlands unfamiliar to him. His mind struggled desperately not to be overcome. In the Writings he had heard of what men call ‘the dark night of the soul’, of that despair which seems infinite whilst the human heart remains less than finite, struggling with its own creaturehood, seeking to rise above the sweeping accusations that would choke and destroy it. Balwone was entering the guilt which all mankind knows, not only for its acts of sin, but also for its being less a creature than it was created to be.

For many hours he lived in this despair until he was nigh senseless, and his spirit moaned pitifully for deliverance, yet none came. Somewhere—at the hinder parts of his mind—he knew this kind of experience was not unique to him. He only had not come to this horror of darkness. So many of the sages had entered the dark tunnel of self-discovery and had loathed what they saw, fighting the very spirit which now turned on itself in self-contempt, yet which would not confess that it was thus and thus.

It seemed to him that an eternity of suffering had enveloped him. He could neither die nor live, and knew not whether he was dead or alive. He could hear the whimpers of his spirit, the utterances that came from his desuetude, but he could not stem them

nor further argue with the Presence which long ago had become silent and was neither accusing nor excusing.

Finally he found the power to whisper, and as he did, his own voice sounded strange, as though it were that of another.

‘I had assumed I was Thy servant,’ he cried hoarsely, ‘but now Thou dost tell me I was my own. I had thought I was pure, but Thou tellest me I am polluted. I had thought I lived in the gift of humility, but Thou informest me that I am a man of pride. I had longed to see the coming of Massia and, like others before me, I had sought to make his way clear and to bring him to his true hour. Thou tellest me in all this that I have sinned, yet I had always sought to be true to the Presence, to learn from the sages—even Thy servants Flamgrid, Facius and Merphein. Now I am told to see all this was in vain. Where, O Great One, am I? And what am I? And will I ever be other than the dark spirit I am informed that I am?’

‘Some of your complaint is out of the bitterness of pride,’ said the Voice, ‘yet within it, too, is hope, for you have seen what you are. However, you have not seen what you are not. You have not further seen what I have made you to be, for it is I who make all to be what they are, even though they would resist the hand of the Potter. Resistance makes ugly that which I would shape into beauty, but beauty is more treacherous than the ugly when pride comes to survey itself.’

Balwone’s bewilderment grew. ‘These thoughts are too deep for me,’ he pleaded. ‘I see things as far off, and deep, very deep, and so I cannot know them.’

‘Know them you must,’ said the Presence, ‘for to this end you have been born, and none can escape his destiny, not even the wicked who are cast for the day of trouble. You are cast for the day of beauty and of glory, but as yet you cannot be trusted with such treasure, lest your pride turn upon you and destroy you utterly. It is my compassion which brings you into the place of death, that you may go out into life.’

Again his spirit whimpered, and his mind became as a mass of slithering serpents that take over human thoughts and change them to senseless, evil creatures. He lay motionless, scarcely knowing what to say. Ever and anon the silence grew until the

motions of the mind ceased and the serpents were gone. Yet the emptiness was no more to be endured than the churning of the thoughts which had troubled him. He felt he was so faint that life itself might have gone from him, and he was now in a limbo devoid of meaning and voided of true being. Yet, when all seemed to be nothingness, and hope had died because of lack of promise, the Voice spoke.

‘It is time now, Balwone, my son, to arise from the death of yourself and to be on your way. Be not forgetful. Remember always this dark night. Have gentleness within you. Be not ambitious for yourself and the high goal set before you. Humility is born of no man, but every woman and man is born for humility. Finding this, the person becomes one with the Presence, but to be one with me must mean the death of high pride. It must be the entering into love, without which nothing is worthwhile.’

Balwone wondered as he heard the Voice. A deep awe began to flood him, an awe that had within it a terrible fear.

The Voice continued. ‘Think not that your only crisis has passed, and that you will ever be free of the pride that destroys. Your very good works, and your fruits of humility, will turn against you. You will know how high a creature is Man, yet how dreadful his heart when pride deceives him into thinking it is the very Presence himself.’

The knight felt these words burn deeply into him. As he felt the branding of them like hot iron on nerveless flesh, he thought afresh that he saw the eyes of those who had loved him.

Merphein looked with love tinged with sorrow. Facius’s eyes were like the water of the stream at floodtide, brown and troubled, whilst the fire of Flamgrid’s eyes was as blue ice, and yet as gentle as the bluebells the breeze had tossed to and fro those many times in that darling forest glade. In all eyes was love, and the tired spirit of the knight seized gladly upon this gift, not as a drowning man grasps at a chance spar, but as one human is warmed and nourished by the true friendship of another, and others.

He felt the rise in his spirit, and his mind seemed pure, as though discharged of its perilous stuff, and as though he were now permitted to begin life afresh, life that might never have

again the dark spirit of deceit, nor become drunk on the heady wine of wild human pride.

As he picked up his staff and shouldered again his pack and gathered to his side the wallet of precious Writings, he felt as one rescued from the grave, and entered afresh into life—true life—yet a life of simplicity.

In the distance he espied a humble rural dwelling, and with eagerness he made his way towards it. So many homes he had visited, so many people he had met, but—as the Voice had said—the seeing and the meeting had not been at the level of the humanity that is common to all. He sensed, as he moved towards this place, that something of his destiny would be revealed. He was filled with excitement and anticipation, that he would at last know the race into which he had been born—that vast and varied community of persons to which he must one day bring love, and this in accordance with the will of the Most High.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## Moving Among Those of the Human Race

IT WAS early dawn when Balwone moved towards the rural dwelling. It was rude enough, a country house, and doubtless the home of peasants. Its high roof sloped steeply on both sides in order to ensure the snow slipped away from it. Both the roof and the walls were thatched with straw and dried mud and, as was the custom, freshly layered each year to prevent the winter rains penetrating it. Inside, he doubted not, the rough uprights and beams would be unsawn but pleasant enough in their natural state.

Near to the house stood a substantial byre to shelter the farm animals in the winter and to store hay in its loft. Small paddocks were fenced with split timber rails which would keep in the cows and even a bull. He could imagine the family milking the cows, shearing the sheep of their wool and spinning the long fibres on winter nights, with the light from an oil wick burning in a shallow pan.

The only sign of life now was the lazy upward curling of white smoke—sign of a fire which was not new. He made his way around the byre and looked at the house. The windows, to his surprise, were of rough glaze and lacked the usual shutters.

As he rounded the house he heard a rough voice in country dialect call out to him.

‘Who art thou? Why comest thou here?’

When he looked he saw a man by the byre milking a cow. He was seated on a roughly carved stool with thick legs. The man himself was stout, with deep blue eyes and a ruddy complexion on a face that was round as the moon.

Balwone was at a loss for a moment. Somehow he had been guided here and, in any case, he was famished.

‘I am looking for a good breakfast and perhaps a little hospitality.’

The man nodded and drew out the last of the milk from the udder of the fine-looking dam. He straightened up, loosed the cow from its moorings and sent it towards the pasture.

‘’Tis few we have calling upon us these days,’ said the man, ‘so thou art not one in many.’

He opened the door and ushered in the stranger. His wife was bending over a stove, and a young woman with a knife was working on vegetables at a table. The man set down his pail of milk on the same table and gave the girl a glance.

‘’Tis a stranger we have with us and, by the look of him, he could do with some breakfast.’

He motioned to Balwone to be seated, and as he did the two women paused to consider him. The wife was aproned, and placed her hands on her hips and surveyed him with keen eyes. Without a word she returned to her bending over the pot. The girl scarcely glanced at him, but her cheeks coloured. He noticed her flaxen curls fell about her face. Her eyes were of a lighter blue than those of the farmer, but there was an intensity in them. Being a man, Balwone could not but notice the fine form of the woman, though the thick clothes and apron partly obscured the natural shape of her. He felt a tremor run through his body, but ignored it as he greeted both farm women.

Without a word the wife brought a thick broth to the table and poured it into bowls. The girl seated herself and, after a bowing of the head, they nodded to him to eat, which he was glad to do.

So was his entrance into the family of Alwyn Firsini, a yeoman-farmer whose simple acceptance of the stranger was prompted from a source he knew and understood, for without this he would have hosted the visitor for a meal and then sent him on his way.

They worked in the fields that day and the days following. Balwone learned to milk a cow—a thing he had never done. He also learned how to clean the muck into piles and spread it on the field ready for ploughing. He was used to handling horses,

though not for ploughing; however, he learned how to use the wooden mouldboard and to hold the two horses, with his hands gripping the crude handles of the implement. He came to love the straining, plodding beasts with their heads nodding up and down from the effort. He learned to become one with the rhythm of their plodding hooves, their bodies thrusting forward, whilst all the time the furrow churned like an unending brown wave that converted green pasture into a brown sea. Behind them came the crying birds seeking for worms and grubs, and above him was the sky of peerless blue, flecked with white clouds of lambswool softness. He came to love the thumping of the heavy draughts, the smell of their sweaty bodies and the foam-covered leather harness. When they were finished for the day he would rub their sweat-darkened bodies down with coarse cloth until the sweat was gone and the coats became glossy as they munched the coarse grain and hay in the food-stall.

The farmer was silently approving, but one day he surprised the visitor as he sat reading the parchments from his wallet. The farmer's eyes were without surprise; the deep blue of them was calm with understanding. He looked steadily at his working guest and said, 'Thou be he, eh? He who must teach the world of the thing called love, so that all become one?'

His words were a question, a statement and an affirmation all in one. Balwone was amazed, but he lowered his eyes.

'Few there be,' said the farmer, 'that have the skill of reading, and such do not plough with horses or rake muck across the land. I saw it in thine eyes when thou camest, else I had sent thee on thy way with only a kindly breaking of thy fast.'

'How do you know such things?' the knight asked. 'Are there others such as you?'

'Aye,' said the man. 'There be many and there be nought. There be those who know, and those who know nothing. There be those who love and those who hate.'

He came a little closer to his guest, and now his eyes peered at him sternly from under furrowed brows. 'There be one here who already loves thee, and she be young, and she be my lass. She be clean also. Thou knowest that there be two loves—one that be truly love and one that be not—and that which she has is pure.'

Thou, too, art pure. Let it be that way, but let her not be caught into thee, or she be doomed.'

The words were like winter water in the heart of the knight. He knew his eyes had fallen on the farm-girl, and that her simplicity caught at him like brambles upon woollen garments, but he desired no discourse with her other than all humans want where there is beauty and warmth of humanity. His own face coloured now as hers had earlier that day.

'Thou be not for such as she,' the older man said sternly. 'Wool and flax do not mix, and thou art of another breed, and a noble one at that.'

Even as he said it a dark look came across his face. Balwone did not know the reason for it until some days later, and then he understood.

The farmer saw that his new friend did not understand his speech. The dialect he could comprehend but not the talk about wool and flax, and the differences in breed. Balwone had flushed at that, and his eyes had shone with some kind of anger.

'All are noble!' he said abruptly. 'All are ultimately of the one blood. All come from one stock.'

The yeoman's reply was a mirthless laugh, yet in it was no bitterness. Nevertheless his face was stern.

'Much has happened,' he said, 'since we came from that one stock, and much will happen; but now it is serf and yeoman and lord, as there are also knights and squires and their ladies. There be also governors, princes and kings.' His eyes were filled with meaning, but the mystery of it baffled Balwone who longed to know some of the secrets of this stout heart.

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There was thus the day when the lord of the serfdom, Edwin Corsini, made his way through the lease of the farmer. He was dressed in heavy black cloth and a sword swung at his side. His own face was dark, and his black eyes glittered. They were eyes that searched for Merom, the daughter of Alwyn Firsini, and he showed no interest in the farmer himself.

He leaned down from his horse and stared at the yeoman. 'And where be your beauty, your flaxen-haired one?' he asked.

He added, 'I see now none but this plain fellow.' He nodded curtly at the new labourer, and there was scorn in his eyes.

'Thou art here to see me concerning thy lease?' asked the farmer. 'If not, there be much to do, and do I must if we are to pay high dues and taxes and rent together.'

There was a sly laugh for an answer. The knight knew this sneer was no answer. He had taken a dislike to the overlord of this serfdom and he could barely conceal his anger.

'You there,' said the squire of the land. 'Where be you from, and what makes you tarry in this place?'

Wisdom made Balwone shrug his shoulders, for he knew he could easily bring harm to his employer. 'I be from here and there,' he said simply, 'and then I shall be to elsewhere, but all in good time, for such times are written for all men.'

'Some there are,' the landlord said, 'who have fine words, and it be they who seek out a pretty wench, and when they are done with her are gone from sight forever.'

'Be done!' said the farmer angrily. 'Time wastes whilst we talk such things. We had better be doing, as thou wilt be going. That is how it must be.'

The man, however, was not done. He edged his horse to-wards Balwone, and stared down at him with contempt.

'I think I shall warn you to be on *your* way.'

Balwone would have unhorsed the man and dealt with him summarily—strong and formidable as was the huge form of the man—but he feared for the tenant-farmer.

It was at that moment that Merom came through the doorway and stood looking at the three men. With a start she realised who had come, and she hurriedly went in and closed the door. It was at that moment the knight realised his heart had plans for the young woman with the flaxen hair, and his boldness showed through to Edwin Corsini, the landlord.

'I think I shall send you on your way,' the man said. 'Be getting your things and leave this land of mine, or I will run you through with this good blade of mine.'

He little knew of the battle going on in the breast of the knight. Balwone felt a terrible sense of despair of being waylaid in his mission of being the servant of Massia, and of bringing love and

peace to the race he professed to love, and that race included the swarthy landlord as much as the rosy-cheeked farmer and his two women. He knew the anger welling up in him, and spoke to the lord of serfs and yeomen.

'It is true I must be on my way if you, the lord of this land, will have it this way, but whereunto I go, and for what purpose, you may not know, for as yet you will not understand. As for this farmer who has befriended me, remember he is my friend and bring no sorrow upon him for my sake.'

The farmer watched, and Balwone saw helpless rage in his eyes, but as quickly as it came, so as quickly it went. His tone was quiet but passionate when he spoke.

'Thou, master of these lands and lord of us yeomen and serfs, may have power over life and death, but there is a higher than thee, and this, my friend, is close to that One. If thou sendest him away, thou wilt rue the day. If because of my lass your anger is against him, then double will be the penalty when time's time comes to thee.'

The knight saw the fear that was in the eyes of the landlord. A yeoman has rights, and this man was out of kilter with them in ordering off the servant of a paying farmer. Balwone could see the man was consumed by passion for Merom, but that he was by nature a man of passion on all scores, and now anger chased fear across his face. He sat stiffly on his horse and, in some ways, was helpless in the face of the resisting farmer. Balwone meanwhile let his eyes rove across field and copse and green undulations, and he knew possession had corrupted their owner, for beauty and power can set the rot of pride where they should bring nobility and humility and the will to serve even those who are serfs. He knew, even as he thought it, that the squire of these lands would scorn his ideas as naïve and groundless.

Balwone spoke again. 'I will go,' he said, 'but let all things be as though this had never happened.' He felt a compassion for the farmer whose wisdom was greater than that of the other man and whose integrity of person was inviolable.

Without further ado he went to the byre where he had been dossing and he gathered his night blanket and pack, lifting them on to his shoulders. He passed the farmer and the squire, who

were stiff and silent before the house, and he went to say his farewells.

The farmer's wife was also silent as he addressed her, and the girl was red-eyed. Balwone saw helplessness in the face of the older woman, and fear for herself, as also pity for him in the eyes of the younger. His own countenance he kept cheerful and he nodded his farewell, but his heart ached with a love that he had not known, even when he had sighted the beautiful Gothic of Zed.

The farmer was silent towards Edwin Corsini, but he gripped Balwone's hand firmly and said, 'Thou learnest in this way the ways of men and women, and to thy wisdom thou addest for the day of thy triumph. Let not such things trouble thee. Thou wilt be kept. I thank thee for thy coming, and now for thy going, and know that thou art not alone.'

Corsini heard only the last words, and he started. 'Then there are others besides you?' he asked. 'You are part of a conspiracy?' So many squires and lords lived in mortal fear of the strong men to whom they leased lands, or who were their virtual slaves as serfs. Among such were men who rebelled against the repression used by their lords, and they looked for a day when all men should know the liberty for which a person is born. Such sentiments caused fear in some landowners, but others were gentle and free with their tenants and vassals.

Both men looked at Corsini with scarcely veiled contempt and indifference, and then Balwone turned away, sighting high hills as his place of rest for the night, for there were trees, and they were on the edge of a forest. He saw the golden sunlight spread before the passing of the clouds, and the green of the pastures was as warm gold. He felt his heart cheered, nodded to the yeoman-farmer, and began his tramp towards the forest.

The landlord caught up with him, and leaned down towards him from his mount. 'Make your going swift, my friend, or others will dispatch you in a way you may not care to know.'

Balwone remained silent under the sneering warning. He eased his pack with a shrug of his shoulders and pressed on. Only when he came to a high hillock did he turn his head. He looked back at the house he had come to love, with its white, thin

curl of smoke, its glazed windows and the byre in which he had lived. Firsini had gone into the house—doubtless to comfort and reassure his women—but the knight felt no loneliness. He knew that those who are wise see proper purpose in all things—even the things which can anger a human being.

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He reached the forest at nightfall. He had a flask Flamgrid had long ago given him and which he had replenished innumerable times. Now he opened it and drank some of the fluid. He made for himself a fire to keep warm for the night, but this he made only when he had penetrated into the depths of the woods so that none could mark where he was and come to do him harm. So much had Flamgrid taught him, and his years of visitation amongst men and women had made caution habitual. He lay back, chewing on the tough strips of smoke-dried venison seasoned in the way the cobbler had trained him to do, and his thoughts were ones of peace. The fire warmed his body whilst remembrance of Firsini's family warmed his heart. Thoughts of Flamgrid kept flowing through his mind, and he remembered the message of the Voice—that he was to live with men and women and become part of their great corpus. He was slowly realising his experience of these last days was part of his apprenticeship, and he smiled. Perhaps he had lost time in simply observing humankind without living with it in its sufferings and sharing in its joys.

He had slept without knowing it, for his thoughts had gone on in his dreams, until a noise alerted him, and he woke. He lay still, seeking to know what creature was present. The Presence he always knew. It had always been part of his life, and rarely did that Presence trouble him. Absence of it would have caused him deep trouble, and even pain, but another presence was near which was not the true Presence. He felt the evil, as though something was intruding upon his calm and contemplative life. He knew no terror, but caution throbbed in his head as wariness gripped his body.

All of a sudden a great bulk of a man rushed upon him. This the knight could see in the light of his fire, but Balwone had not

been trained in the martial arts for nothing. He slewed around, drew back and, as the man made for him, he heaved his two legs into the middle of the assailant's belly and there was a cry, then a grunt and the man fell. Quick as a flash Balwone was on his feet, dancing away but ready for the next move.

It came quickly. With the roar of a bull that has been wounded, the man rushed him again, and this time a long knife flashed in the firelight. As he came Balwone stepped aside, tripped his enemy and brought down a hand in chopping fashion on the bull-like neck. The man pitched forward and lay still, as though unconscious. When the knight moved forwards the assailant suddenly roared again and lashed out with his legs, but Balwone was too quick for him. He kicked at the man's hand, then trod on it with such force that the knife was loosed from the grip of the would-be murderer. Balwone flicked the weapon into the forest darkness until it was lost to the sight of both of them.

The man scrambled to his feet, ready to rush again, but something in the stance of the knight made him cautious. He paused, glaring across the firelight, his arms spread-eagled and his black-bearded mouth red with roaring curses, as though he would terrify his opponent. Instead of another rush, he lifted his arms as does a professional pugilist and Balwone knew a sudden savage joy. This way of fighting he knew, and he took up his own stance.

The man came on blindly, swinging his arms, flailing like a windmill, but that showed he knew little of this art of human warfare. Balwone stepped aside and thudded his left fist into the bearded jaw. The man shuddered, but turned again, and the knight delivered a blow that felled him.

Quick as a flash Balwone drew his hunting knife and stood over his assailant.

In the light of the fire he saw fear glitter in the black eyes, and a cry came out of that fear. He began to scream for mercy, and the knight stood staring at him.

'Did you come of yourself, or did another send you?' he asked.

The fear deepened in the man, yet he was silent. Balwone swivelled the knife handle in his palm. 'Tell,' he said, 'or your innards will feel this.'

'I was sent,' the man said sullenly. 'Our master sent me. He said thou wert a spy and a conspirator, and he would pay me well to have done with thee.'

Balwone sheathed his knife. He was alert for any movement, but the man seemed to have lost his spirit and had no will left in him to kill. The knight motioned the man towards the fire, and they sat facing one another across the flickering flames. With a faggot Balwone stirred the hot ashes and he laid fresh wood until the face of the man could be seen full clearly.

'Is this the first time?' asked the knight. 'Have there been others you have despatched?'

The man nodded sullenly. 'I hate the work, but he has chosen me for it, and fate says I must do it, and do it forever.'

Balwone felt pain for his assailant, and he opened his flask, offering it to the man. He saw the eyes widen, the fear grow, but the man took some greedy gulps, and then his eyes shone.

'This is a brew for the gods,' he said. 'It is pure nectar.' He looked longingly at the container but returned it to Balwone.

'It is to show you I am not your enemy. As for Corsini, he does not deserve to live. I also fear he has intentions upon the daughter of Firsini.'

The man grunted, nodding his assent. 'We are all his slaves. We must do as he bids us, or we will starve. Worse, he will set another of his victims upon us, and then where shall we be?'

A strange notion came to Balwone, and he shook his head as though to be rid of it, but a sight of Flamgrid came to him and memory of words he had spoken. He stood up, came around the fire, and sat next to the man with the bull-like neck.

'Friend,' he said, 'it would be better for you to travel with me and so be a free man. No one has the right over another man to make him a slave and a murderer. With me you could live, and without me you will be dead because you have failed to kill me. In this way Corsini may think we have both perished in the struggle, and he will care little to seek out our dead bodies.'

The man sat as though paralysed. Long he looked into the deep red ashes, but he stirred not for half an hour. Then great sobs were rent from him. His massive chest heaved, and tears trickled down his black beard.

‘Thou wouldst offer thy murderer a place beside thee, and a life with thee?’ His voice was almost a screech.

Balwone nodded. ‘There is much to be done in life, my friend,’ he said, ‘and I need a good stout companion such as you. Have done with your past and make a new future for yourself.’ He paused. ‘Unless, of course, you be wed, and have children, and perhaps some land under lease.’

‘None of these I have,’ said the man and there was deep anger in him. ‘I have been all my life at the beck and call of our masters, and Corsini sees to it that I cannot live without I serve him.’

‘We must be going fast,’ said Balwone. ‘So let us retrieve your good knife and be on our way before the dawn catches up with us and others come to know our story.’

He took a brand and held it high, whilst the two men searched for the knife. They found it and the man sheathed it with a sob. Balwone knew he had a willing servant and friend, and he did not even guard his back as he turned to shoulder his pack.

Both grasped a brand before they doused the fire, and they found their way through forest paths, going more and more into the heart of the wood.

Only once did one of them speak. Balwone asked his new friend whether Corsini intended to kill Firsini.

The man gave a harsh laugh. ‘He will not kill Firsini, for he is his best yeoman. Yet he will rape the man’s daughter and that without doubt. He is a man of lust and his spirit maddens when he sees beauty. He must destroy what is beautiful or some black demon in him will never let him rest.’

One other question the knight asked as they put time and distance between themselves and the local lord.

‘By what name do they call you?’ he asked.

His companion said, ‘Roget, they call me, but whence I came and of whom I am I know not. Yes, Roget is my name, and what, may I ask is thine? What shall I call thee?’

‘Balwone,’ said the knight. ‘Just Balwone shall be enough.’

The other man nodded, and they made their way through the last watch of the night, moving as rapidly as they could towards the dawn and all that their destinies had for them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Balwone and Roget in the City of Cotillon

THE LAST of Balwone’s preserved supplies ran out as they broke their fast that morning. On the edge of what seemed to be a royal forest, they ate the dried venison by first boiling it and then laying it in the hot ashes, and most delicious it was. They drank the remainder of the flask, and further drank water at a stream in which they also refreshed themselves.

They now had their chance to observe each other. Roget seemed surprised, even embarrassed, as he surveyed the victor of their fight.

‘Thou art a nobleman!’ was his first utterance. ‘Thou art no serf or vassal. Truly thou art a liege! How wrong, then, Corsini was, and he will suffer for the same!’

His hoarse, barked utterances caused Balwone to smile. ‘It matters not what I am,’ he said gently, ‘but my heart is in the eternal wisdom. That is what brings me here and takes me on to other places.’

The thickset man opposite him was six feet in height, if an inch, and was strong in limb, having a chest like a barrel and eyes that showed great strength of character. Vassal he may have been through environment and circumstances, but placid servant he would be to no one, so strong-willed he was. The knight judged he would be a good friend and a loyal one to someone he fancied. He noticed the large broad-fingered hands with black hair curling about them. He had a slight wonder at having vanquished his companion, and marvelled that he was so placid in his company.

For his part, the bulky bear of a person could not keep the wonder from his eyes, and with it was no little awe.

Roget then stretched out in the morning sun as its rays lit the tips of the forest grass and rendered them a soft gold. Balwone riffled through his parchments and drew one which was more precious to him than the others. He was soon lost in its contents whilst the solid serf eyed him with puzzlement.

Finally the man spoke. 'It be that thou dost read. Thou art a scholar! Then thou must be also a mystery. A knight who is a scholar and yet a vagrant, and who rakes muck for a farmer, and warns a squire off a country maiden!' It all seemed too much for the erstwhile vassal of Corsini, and he lay back again.

At first Balwone said nothing. Then he sat up, the parchment in his hands and its good words in his head.

'Here,' he said, tapping the document, 'lies ancient wisdom. These great men of old received from their masters, and passed on to their pupils, the mystery of creation, of gods and men, and the prophecies of the ages to come. All these things are as close to us as are skins to our flesh. By them we interpret the motions of men and the actions of the gods. Most especially we learn the purposes of the Most High, the great Maker of all.'

Roget shifted restlessly. 'I have always feared the gods, the spirits, the creatures of the night, the beasties that come to frighten us. I'm so afear'd since nothing much has come good in my life, and seek not to think about those high things.'

'They are nothing,' said Balwone. 'They are limited by the Most High of them all. He allows only what is finally good.'

The other man shook his head vehemently. 'I have heard and seen enough in this kingdom,' he said, 'to show that evil wins every time. Evil in the country, evil in the city. It is all of a one. Thou must know something beyond me, and I am a murderer, even if not by choice, even if my heart was never in it. If there be nothing beyond what I have been and what they have worked to make me, then I am done, even in this world.' He trembled with rage and longing as he said these words, and something within Balwone stirred mightily and he longed to impart the things of love that he was learning, but he knew he must bide his time.

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After their discussion they made their way through farms and hamlets until they arrived at the city of Cotillon. From a distance that city looked wonderfully beautiful—the sun breaking across its high castellated turrets and battlements. In other cities Balwone had been an observer of men and women. In this one he was to become one with its inhabitants—those high and those low, if possible—and thus he would be put in the way of telling the message of true love which was building up in his heart, in his mind and in his spirit. As they approached the city, the knight had both a sense of excitement and of heavy foreboding. What, then, would he meet here?

Roget suddenly grabbed him by the arm and pulled him off the road, hurrying him to a hedgerow, where, at his bidding, they hid.

'Some of Corsini's men,' explained the erstwhile murderer. 'I suspect they be after us. In this kingdom of Flagland they are hard men for justice, if indeed one can call it justice. That man has searched to find thy corpse and mine—if that had to be—and has failed. It's the hatred he has of thee that will seek to deliver thee to the Sheriff of Cotillon, I'll be bound. That Sheriff is a strong man and a stern one, and thou wilt never escape him if thy purpose is to live in Cotillon. I think it better that we take the old road and go on to Rougin.'

'Our destiny is this city,' said Balwone. 'That I will wager with you.' He fell to trembling.

When the posse had passed, Roget led him by a way other than the main road. 'I have friends here,' he said, 'if only we can get other clothes. 'Tis yours they will be looking for, and mine no doubt.'

The back entrance to the city was a dismal one. Here were no ancient buildings, nothing to tell of a great city and a proud history. Its prospects were dismal—mud and mess and muck up to the miserable hovels which lay behind the main street and its more presentable stores. The suburbs this side of the city must surely contain the flotsam and jetsam of miserable humanity and its doings.

''Tis where the evil ones live,' the man said. 'They gather together because they are the broken people of our days, the

scum of our society. 'Tis the brothels, and the criminal elements that gather together here. That is why I know it, but for us it will be a refuge. Not even the Sheriff's men come hither. They care for their throats and purses no doubt, but more for their lives. If they do come, they must needs come as in an army.'

By this time they had arrived at a weather-beaten door and Roget knocked in a way which was no doubt a sign to the in-habitants.

When the bent derelict of an aged man opened the door, the evil smell of the place flowed out. Balwone felt a terrible misgiving but he stood firm with his companion. They were ushered in. The interior was dark, difficult to distinguish until they had stood for some silent minutes. It was then the knight saw two unkempt men and a woman in rags seated around a table. Another was lying on a bench which he doubted not served as a bed, but there was no mattress nor were there coverings.

After a further pause in time, the three at the table beckoned the travellers to come. There were indifferent introductions. Balwone noticed that all eyes were on his clothes, though not on him. Roget they obviously respected, but there was no animation in their looks. The air, the people, the place were all lack-lustre. The knight felt the dread of it all, and in the pit of his belly there was a horror and a sorrow he could not withhold from his eyes, but these inhabitants were not looking at his eyes. He knew they were coveting his clothes.

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This was the beginning of the nightmare: the surrender of his respectable tunic and trows for the rags of the inhabitants. They looked eagerly at his pack, but Roget flicked his knife from its sheath, and the growl that came from him was like that of a mastiff.

'An exchange is all we want,' he said. 'Corsini's men are after us, and we need to hide. If we move amongst the people, they must not see us as we were.'

A man whom Balwone came to know as Peget said harshly, 'Then you had better have dust in your hair, and unwashed faces,

as we have. Otherwise they will take you and make you serfs, and there'll be no escape.'

Roget nodded. He looked at Balwone. 'Tis here we have to live until it is our time to escape. They'll be spreading copper coins amongst the rabble here until they find out where we are, and then they will have their way with us.' Even Roget shuddered as he spoke.

If it could be called sympathy, then it was that which the derelicts gave through their nodding. Peget vowed none would hear of them, no matter what coins were distributed by the men of the Sheriff or Corsini.

The two men made their pack secure on the promise of Peget, underlined by Roget running a finger along the edge of his knife. They would be back, he assured them. They just had business to do for the time. Balwone hid his wallet of documents under the stinking rags he wore, but first he showed the company that they were writings and not money. They nodded with stolid indifference as he first revealed and then concealed the wallet.

It was dark in that part of the city, and they were glad of the coverage it gave. Balwone sought a cobbler's shop that he might try out his learned skill. They were unsuccessful, until the disguised knight mentioned Flamgrid's name. It was then he saw the awe in eyes, and they hastened to bid him come inside. The place was reasonably tidy—not unkempt as the first house. Here he was informed that a cobbler resided in a better area of the city—a less slum-like district.

The cobbler to whom they were led knew Flamgrid. He was a short, bent man with a high forehead and intelligent eyes, as penetrating and boring as his gimlets, and he came close to Balwone to stare into his face and made an assessment. He was nigh on a worshipper of the cobbler of Zed, and so was glad to give Balwone a modicum of cobbling work to test him out. When he recognised the hand of the master of cobblers he called for hot gruel, and the two men ate hungrily. The man's name was Pequey and he obviously was loyal to the sage of Zed, for this was how he saw him. He agreed to hide the wallet and offered remuneration at the end of the day—the day wages of a worker.

The two men were glad of the help, and it was agreed they should return on the morrow. Perhaps Roget could cut leather uppers with his long knife which the cobbler now honed to a razor sharpness.

Night was difficult because of the lack of lights. Here and there they saw a gleam of a lamp as they peered through the barred windows to discover a place of eating. When they found one, Balwone wondered whether he could endure the constant stink of the place. Only the smell of food mingling with the smells of the slum made it partly tolerable.

It was all a long cry from the castle in which he had once lived, and even a dreadful descent from the forest glade of the cobbler and his rude buildings. Yet it caused the pulses of Balwone to beat faster, and he found there were tears in his heart for the lot of this people. What he noted was their furtive glances, looks they cast suspiciously at him and Roget, and the ears that were constantly strained for the sounds of the runners of the Sheriff—the authority they loathed and which caused them to gather together like rats in a sewer.

Tumultuous thoughts were stirring in the mind of the servant of Massia. How he longed that that Great One might come and cleanse the cities' slums, and set men free to live in peace and joy, and to know mutual love! Even so, the very thought seemed so foreign to the surroundings and the desperate plight of these slaves of their age, as to make the Wisdom of the ancients seem idealistic and unreal. It was no great comfort to know that throughout history such slums had always been, and that the offscourings of humanity had gathered in these places to share their humiliation and to numb their minds by drugs and the shreds of illicit pleasure such as they could afford by ill-gotten gains of theft and murder. The knight felt the emptiness of the life about him, and the emptiness oppressed his spirit.

They passed by a section which was better lit. The lights were red, and although Balwone knew not how they made this colour, he felt flames of shame as half-naked women flaunted their invitations, and drunken sots gave over to them. It was not that he had not seen such places before, but the dreariness and hollowness of it all made him retch, and he gagged on the uprisings of his bile.

Roget scarcely saw the misery and futility of all about them. He hurried his companion towards the wretched hovel they had visited that morning. More interest was shown in them than earlier in the day, and Roget could sense the suspicion toward his fellow traveller. He knew the people in this hut were uneasy in the presence of aristocracy. He said nothing to Balwone because conversation was not possible, but when it came time to sleep, he whispered to Balwone a warning to be very careful.

They let the knight sleep on the bench. The woman had gone to another hovel, and only the men remained. Peget offered them nothing to eat, and they were glad of that. Roget lay on the floor alongside the bench, and drew his rags up to keep him warm in the night that was fast drawing cold.

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That night the dragon visited Balwone. He was there in the city—in its main square—and he stared down at the knight with fiery scorn as he breathed hatred and death from his strong nostrils.

'How dare you come to my domain?' he roared. 'This is not a place for chivalrous knights and great deliverers. What would you do with the scum amongst whom you tarry? Such are muck forever. As for your finer folk who dwell in comfort and riches —will you seek to change their hearts from their selfish self-preoccupation?'

Balwone found his fear of the dragon had gone, dissipated in his concern for the poor, and the rich, of this city. Pictures of Facius, Flamgrid, Merphein and Merom came and went—a mixture of images that encouraged and yet puzzled him. Then came the images of the men with whom he had jostled, often wounding them deeply, and he felt an unaccustomed sorrow, a deep sensitivity. He saw the glaring eyes of the black-bearded Corsini, and a person whom he had never seen but whom he supposed to be the Sheriff of Cotillon, a handsome, well-fed but mean-countenanced man, resplendent in the clothes of his office.

The dragon was uttering haughty laughter, hot scorn that was intended to scorch the mind of the savant, the pupil of Flamgrid the sage.

'You,' he said. 'You are not as pure of mind as you would make out. What of the wench Merom? Did you not have it in your heart to possess her? And where is the loyalty of your mind and heart to the fair Gothlic of Zed? You are a person of many minds. You have disgust for the wretched and lowly, and a mighty, high view of yourself as the saviour of all people. Your love is spurious, yet you vaunt yourself as a servant of Massia.'

With his own utterance of the last name the dragon seemed to be enraged beyond measure. His eyes shone hotly, redly, at the apprentice of Flamgrid, and his fire came in strong blasts, sulphurous and stinking to the nostrils of the knight. Balwone drew a sword of great length—a sword he had not known he possessed—and he rushed at the dragon, his cheeks aflame and his eyes not less hot than the hated creature before him.'

'Out, foul creature!' he cried. 'The stench of your evils is strange and hateful to my nostrils. Name not the two fair damsels with your sneering and suggestive words. I will have upon you, and destroy you.'

With that he attacked the dragon and, for a strange and wonderful moment, it seemed his word and his wallet were as one, so much so that the dragon drew back, some kind of terror invading its eyes. Wondering at his own temerity, the son of Facius and Merphein plunged his weapon into the soft underbelly of the dreadful creature, and it went in up to the haft, and mess and muck tumbled out of the beast, and it seemed that in a moment it expired and yet at the same time withdrew from the knight as though seeking to maintain its life, even though much of it lay upon the square of the city. When Balwone looked about him he could see nothing, and then his eyes opened and he was lying upon the bench of the hovel and Roget was staring up at him in the dim light of the smoking lamp. The other men were also staring, and there was a certain fear in their eyes.

'Thou wert greatly affected by some dream,' said Roget, 'and I heard thy terrible cries.'

Balwone remained silent, offering no explanation. After a time they both withdrew into sleep, but Balwone could hear strange and awful laughter and he felt deeply down that somehow the

dragon had done him harm and that he had not at all destroyed the creature. His sneers concerning Gothlic and Merom were somehow working in the depths of the knight, bringing a sense of unnatural shame. He felt tainted by the insinuations and wondered why this should be.

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The knight felt it might be time for them to move on, to leave the city and pursue their journey, and perhaps to go on to Rougin—the city of which Roget had spoken—but even as they discussed the matter and before they had broken their fast there was a cry at the door and great hammering. The men looked at one another as though they knew what was to happen. They ran quickly to the door, taking away the great hardwood bar which held it locked.

It was then that a posse of men tumbled into the room, and Roget and his friend knew they were from the Sheriff. Their hearts sank, but there was no way of escape. They did not even resist, wondering all the time why they should be arrested by the leader of the posse. It then dawned on them that they had been betrayed by the men of this hovel in which they had tarried.

'You are traitors of another kingdom!' shouted the officer. 'You are spies that come to find out our strengths and our weaknesses. Corsini the squire has told us of your deeds, and the Sheriff will have his say with you.'

They were allowed no protest, but roughly handled and bundled off to the Sheriff's office in the city square. There was the man whose visage Balwone had seen in his dream, and the knight knew that he was in cohorts with both the evil dragon and the landlord Corsini. He stared at the prosperous-looking but mean-visaged Sheriff—the one he had seen in his dream, but who showed no sympathy for the apprehended couple. Balwone was not surprised when their protests went unheard. The Sheriff held a harsh look on his face, and his eyes gleamed with disapproval of his prisoners. The two were bundled unceremoniously into a foul dungeon which smelt like the worst of the slums, even though it was deeply underground.

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Then began a time in Balwone's life which was unforgettable. All his days he would remember the horror of those times—days and even weeks—when they starved for lack of sufficient food and when they even panted for water, although their cell was cold and dank. The stench of urine and faeces, the withholding of water for washing, the degeneration of their garments and the contempt of the callous jailers all worked upon their spirits.

When it would seem life was even ebbing away, some rough provender would be thrown to them as though they were animals, and it took all their self-control not to rush upon the rough morsels or greedily drink the thin soup. Balwone was grateful for the immense internal resources of the former murderer, Roget. He wondered greatly at this man and came to see that human beings under heavy pressures often display greatness that does not show itself under other circumstances. He sensed the gratitude of the man whose life he had spared, and he wondered greatly at the loyalty which was beyond comprehension. Roget was determined to protect his master and to see that the internment did not break his spirit. He showed a dry sense of humour, making fun of their captors and ridiculing the system which was so unjust and pitiless.

Sometimes they saw prisoners taken past their cell. The eyes of the captives were sunken back into their heads, the skulls of them showing as death-heads and, when they stared sightlessly towards Balwone and Roget, it seemed the eye-sockets were empty, as though the creatures were devoid of life. Not even despair remained, only the hollow look which tells that a man has gone beyond life into a deathlike existence which means the victim is no being at all.

The passage of these people caused deep anger to Roget who would clench his fists whilst his chest heaved with barely sup-pressed wrath. Even his humour failed him at such times when human beings were denigrated and brought to a death numbness, unable to fight back or retain their dignity as creatures within the human race. The knight—for his part—was filled with the anger that comes from compassion and the frustration that accompanies inability to help. He ached to free the captives and bring them out into the sunshine he had known in the forests of Zed, in

the glade of Flamgrid or with the farmer Alwyn Firsini, his wife and their daughter, Merom.

The passing cavalcade of prisoners brought a deeper ache than ever to Balwone for the human race, and inwardly he sighed at the injustices men devised and the victims their systems created. He knew these men and women would be tried summarily by the courts, and the Sheriff of the city would see to it that free men were made vassals or they would be taken and hanged without justice.

At these times he hungered for a reading of the manuscripts of the ancients, the advice of the wise, the prophecies of the sages, but his wallet lay with the disciple and friend of Flamgrid—the cobbler of Cotillon—and there was no way he could have it smuggled into his cell. Had there been a way, then he would have rejected it for fear of it being taken from him. The one great gift Flamgrid had given to him was the discipline of copying documents with his own quill dipped in ink made from forest berries, and the copying was intended to fix many of the writings in his mind. In this discipline Flamgrid had succeeded, for now the knight drew on reserves that had been heaped up in his memory. It was on these he fastened in the hours of enforced idleness, and the comfort of the thoughts of wisdom kept him sane and his spirit firm.

Sometimes Roget would stare solemnly at him, as though seeking to penetrate his mind and know what kept the knight resilient even as they both starved. At such times Balwone would draw out the things of memory and share them with his companion who would marvel that his knight-friend could produce such wisdom.

'Thou sayest 'tis love will save this world,' he would cry in wonder. 'It will take an ocean or even oceans to cover the evil of our race. Corsini and the Sheriff must needs drown in it before men and women will have the justice they require and need.'

As a person does when he—or she—believes in love, Balwone would eagerly expound the prophecies concerning the great Lover, Massia, and the new world which would come with his advent. Yet such discussions, such eagerness expressed, left the knight trembling and helpless. Also after his discussions with

Roget, often it would happen that night after night the dragon would appear to him. Balwone could see the terrible scar where he—the knight—had plunged his divine weapon into the belly of the beast, and he noticed a new wariness about the creature and a reluctance of it to approach him closely. He wondered at that because his own weakness was increasing, and when he felt for the dream-sword, the weapon seemed not to be present. Perhaps it would be at his side only in times of great need: he did not really know. It seemed—on these night appearances—that the dragon had some kind of respect for him, and even fear, and Balwone marvelled. He wondered whether the wisdom in his own mind brought a kind of dread to the roaring creature.

On one occasion he remembered a writing of the sages, one he had learned off by heart when with Flamgrid. Now it came to him perfect in word from his memory:

There be no such creatures as dragons and strange giants. The Master of the Universe made no such things, for it was not in him to create what is fearsome and unlovely. These strange beings are also not the figments of our fevered imaginations. They are the beasts we bring to life out of our spirits and out of the evil that resides in our secret hearts.

Nor are they made by one man or of one person alone. The human race devises their form and their disposition out of the collective spirit of its evil. Were there no such creatures devised by human myths, then the pain of the mind and the spirit of a person would send that one into insanity. It is a mercy—allowed by the Maker—to bring out the stuff of evil and cause it to become visible in the forms the imagination and the will would have it be. In this way man is confronted with himself and his own terrible evil.

He pondered this, wondering how a dragon could arise from his own heart, and the matter puzzled him. The dragon and its ilk all seemed so real, so much an enemy which was not part of him and which could not arise from him. He felt helpless in the light of the saying of the sage and in the appearances of the dragon which seemed to come to him from outside.

The most terrible of all the dragon visitations was the night when the beast dissolved, and in its place stood a creature so glorious that Balwone could scarcely gaze at it. It seemed that all the beauty he had ever known was caught within the incomparable woman before him. Such splendour both terrified and attracted him. He thought he saw something of his own mother, Merphein, with her calm femininity; the haughty comeliness of the princess Gothic; and the rural radiance of Merom, Firsini's daughter. Yet, too, there was in this woman of splendour something of the poor creatures he had seen around the debased brothels of this very city, and it seemed that all womanhood with its variations of purity and squalor had come together in the one that stood before him. The squalor was marvellously disguised within the outward beauty of the royal female.

A dread grew within him, as though the dragon had somehow defiled womanhood and defiled his own spirit, and the former accusation of the dragon that he was but a fleshly creature himself—tainted with the evil all men knew—returned, and he realised one does not have battle with the forces of evil and escape uncontaminated. He strove hard and long to remember the wisdom of the sages that would explain his dilemma, but the fascination of this female beauty, and the allurements that drew out his own heart, made him yet wail in his spirit. He sought desperately to defeat the impure temptations that assailed him, but his physical weakness and the seemingly hopeless futurity of his case almost overwhelmed him.

Then he felt at his belt, and the sword he had once used on the dragon was in his hand. He drew it to rush upon the woman and destroy her, but the vision vanished and the dragon was before him again. Still, something of womanly laughter mocked at him, as though there were vaults in his miserable prison and vaults in his own soul that knew the sneering insinuations to have some truth. It was this dreadful and insinuating laughter that could press upon his conscience and make him feel greatly defiled.

It was Roget who shook him out of his dreams. 'Thou art in a great fever,' he said. 'Thou art nigh unto death. We must ask the powers that be that they release us from this dungeon of doom.'

Thus the man who would once have murdered him would now have saved his former enemy from the toils of death, had it been in his power to do so.

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Whether the powers that be have human misery in mind and with it, compassion, none could know. Perhaps some intelligence of the status and present state of the prisoners had reached the ears of one of these high powers, for the next day the jailer opened their cell and chained the hands and legs of the two men, taking them at a shuffling gait towards the court of the Sheriff. Both men felt the shame of their filthiness, their ragged garments; and in this state of mind they stared with haggard faces and fevered eyes towards the tormentor of their minds and bodies as he—dressed in the glorious garb of his office—looked back in strong contempt at the withered and emaciated creatures before him. Humiliation of humanity was no new thing to this well-fed but mean-visaged officer of the law.

They watched as another man came into the court, and their hearts sank as they knew it to be Edwin Corsini, the dark and cruel landlord of the Firsini family. Roget stared with barely concealed hatred, whilst Balwone dropped his gaze to the floor and wondered painfully whether the man had fulfilled his lust and defiled the flaxen-haired maid, Merom. Corsini regarded them both with contempt, and in his gaze was a smirk of satisfaction at their miserable state.

That smirk disappeared, to be replaced by terrible rage when the Sheriff spoke.

‘I have come to know in truth,’ he said to Balwone, ‘that you are of the kingdom of Manignia and that you are son of the late knight Facius and that you have sought wisdom at the hand of the sage Flamgrid of Zed. This city to which you have come is famed for its court of justice and for its punishment of spies, traitors and criminals who would bring ill-fame to our kingdom.’

‘I know not how you have come to be the companion of one so low as the man Roget, but I am informed that this honest landlord here—Edwin Corsini—has found cause for accusation

against you both, and so I have brought you here for just trial and will proceed forthwith to hear from landlord Corsini the causes which brought you into our prison.’

The black eyes of the squire-landowner glittered with hatred and triumph mingled.

‘I found this man Your Worship calls a knight of the realm of Manignia to be but a common labourer on the farm of a tenant yeoman named Firsini, and he was greatly insolent to me, who am the landowner of Firsini’s farm. So insolent was he that I perceived him to be a one who would attack his superiors and I expelled him from our region.’

The Sheriff nodded at the report of the black-eyed tyrant.

‘And did you enquire into the citizenship of this one whom we now know to be a knight of Manignia?’ he asked. ‘Did you seek to know his reasons for working as a common labourer on a farm within our kingdom?’

Corsini seemed quite puzzled, but shook his head. The Sheriff inclined his head towards the knightly prisoner.

‘Are you in truth the knight Balwone of the kingdom of Manignia, and do you come as a spy into our kingdom to find our strengths and our weaknesses so that your king may come to invade us?’

A joy came to Balwone that made him tremble, but strengthened him in the midst of his weakness.

‘I indeed confess that Balwone is my name, and that I am a knight of the realm of Manignia, but that kingdom has no war with your realm—the kingdom of Flagland. I am indeed the son of the late Facius, a knight of royal blood and a man famed for his spirit of peace. I, his son, have no warring designs, but rather if designs be the word, then they are those of love.’

Corsini scowled darkly, and seeing this, the emaciated knight, shaking the rags of his sleeves and looking boldly towards the judge, said in a strong voice that surprised himself, ‘I did no wrong to this squire of your realm other than I lived and laboured with the yeoman Firsini. It is true that I disliked the squire Corsini for his lecherous ways and looks, especially towards the fair daughter of my host, the farmer. Without due provocation he became enraged with me and ordered me to leave your realm,

but he sent another to make sure I would never trouble him again. However, that one—to his credit—killed me not, but became my favoured companion in my pilgrimage towards universal love.’

For a moment the Sheriff stared in surprise. Then he said, ‘You are indeed Balwone the knight, for many have told me that you are a man with a vision and that your mind is crazed with ideas of love and freedom for all mankind.’ He shook his head. ‘Of these things I know nothing, nor do I care for them, but I find the accusations brought against you to be false. Therefore, I free you from our jail and I bid you be on your way when we have fed you and clothed you afresh with more fitting garments, and you are strong enough to travel. This city of Cotillon is noted for its justice and care of both citizens and travellers.’

The Sheriff’s last statement sounded both pompous and unreal, and Balwone could not help but think the Sheriff was a self-righteous man, and probably acting upon information and warning that had come to him, and that he was the kind of man that set his sail to the prevailing wind. Nevertheless, he was grateful. He felt dizzy with weakness and joy and could only look gratefully up at the officer of the law. In a daze he heard the Sheriff pronounce judgment on Edwin Corsini for unpardonable action towards a member of the aristocracy, albeit he were no noble of the realm of Flagland. Corsini was devoured by a dark rage and this showed on his face and in his demeanour.

The Sheriff was further pronouncing the judgment of the realm upon the cruel and callous landlord.

‘You have brought our realm into disrepute with a friendly neighbour-kingdom—even the kingdom of Manignia—by your lying accusations against one who is of the rank of knight, and for this you must suffer. In the name of our monarch I dispossess you of your lands and all things appertaining to your appointment as a squire of this realm.

‘The man Roget is known to have been in your employ and he must return to his cell to await special trial, and I doubt not that he will be hanged for his past misdemeanours.’

Balwone cried out with much emotion, shivering and shaking in his weakness. ‘My lord Sheriff, I ask of you the life of this man. He has greatly cared for me and, but for him, I would not be standing before you this day. I earnestly plead that you will grant him the clemency of pardon in accordance with your reputation for justice. I desire that he be my henchman and that I be helped by him as I continue on my way of life and pilgrimage. I will be surety for him in all things and, should he again offend, I would not hesitate to deliver him up to your court and jurisdiction.’

In his heart Balwone knew—and Roget also knew—that this would never be the case. Balwone was also noting the black rage of the landlord now dispossessed, and if possible, that rage was being enlarged by the plea he—the knight—was making to the judge for the life and freedom of Roget.

For his part, the Sheriff was pondering the knight’s impassioned request. After some moments of silence he raised his gavel and brought it down upon the bench of justice.

‘Let it be thus!’ he cried. ‘It will help to make amendment to you—a knight of your kingdom—for this terrible miscarriage of justice.’

He turned to the clerk who had been busily recording the judgments.

‘Roget shall be freed from this hour. Both men shall be given days of hospitality at the expense of our state. They shall be given clothing commensurate with their stations in life. The farmer Alwyn Firsini shall be given the land of which he is now but a tenant, and the squire Edwin Corsini shall be held in custody until the pleasure of the court shall be decided and fulfilled.’

He nodded towards the knight and his companion. ‘We regret the injustices done and pray that right compensation may be made. Now the court is dismissed.’

Corsini was led away by the Sheriff’s officers. He cast a last enraged look at the two liberated prisoners, as though he would yet have his way and his own dark vengeance, but the two were so overjoyed with their freedom that they thought they might faint for the further weakness that it brought to them. In both their minds was the lingering thought that perhaps they had dreamed,

and were still dreaming, and that they would soon awake in their horrible dungeon and their stinking, filthy cell. Neither had dreamed of such clemency and pardon, which seemed to convince them that all that happened was a dream.

It was no dream. This time they were loosed of their chains, led gently and with respect, and were soon quartered in a fine place where hot water was brought to them, and fresh garments. When they had bathed and then eaten well, though with in-structed caution, they were given places for rest and sleep, and so began to recover their strength. In his own room the knight Balwone wept, and whilst some of the tears were for the justice and liberation he had not dreamed would come, there were also tears for the encounters with the fearsome dragon.

Balwone sensed with sadness that somehow the dragon had overcome him in his—the knight's—hours of weakness and had left an infection with him, a contamination that he must be rid of. In his mind he determined—as soon as he had gained sufficient strength—to return to his mentor, Flamgrid, and seek his wisdom afresh. The years that had passed since he had left the cobbler had been ones in which he had learned much, but he longed to share the fruits of his life and to learn further wisdom.

Here, as he rested, he believed he would be free from the incursions of the dragon. When strengthened, he would set out to destroy such creatures, even if they were only creatures of his mind. He determined he would find the nests of these horrible beasts and dispossess them of their powers.

Roget—in the same hours—determined that he would be Balwone's henchman for life. He found, through all the stress of prison and the liberation of the trial, a nobility of being that he had not dreamed could ever come in the life which had been cast for him as a vassal of Corsini. So he gloried in his new garments, feasted well on the unaccustomed range of foods and believed for the first time that in this world there must be good powers, since—for the first time in his life—injustice had been overcome at the hands of the law.

Mostly he drowsed and gathered strength for the task he knew lay ahead of him and his beloved master. Balwone likewise

drowsed, and no beast came to disturb the tranquillity which had come upon him. The two men sensed they were being built up for further hazardous days which lay ahead of them.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Setting Out to Return to Merphein and Flamgrid

ONE MORNING—whilst the two men were regaining their strength—Balwone was informed that he had a visitor. It was Pequey the cobbler, and he carried something in his hand, wrapped in embroidered cloth.

He bowed low to Balwone who was now dressed in clothes befitting a knight, though he wore no armour.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘I bring you your wallet of papers, your treasure of the wisdom manuscripts.’

With equal grace the knight received them. ‘I must reimburse you for hiding them for me.’

The cobbler resisted the offer strongly.

‘It cannot be!’ he exclaimed. ‘You are a student of my old mentor in cobbling, Flamgrid the Wise, and it has been both a pleasure and privilege for me to keep these documents safe. I was afraid they would discover that you had worked for me, but fortune was with us. They knew nothing of our friendship.’

All the while the cobbler showed some kind of awe at seeing again this other pupil of Flamgrid, who looked so noble. Perhaps he looked even more noble because of the strange translucence of skin that men have when they have been starved. He saw the eyes of a visionary, and he honoured the noble person before him.

‘Perhaps one day we shall meet again. Perhaps I will live to see that Great Day,’ and as he said it a thrill went through Balwone, who was now—more than ever—convinced of the

destiny he had treasured from childhood. The acknowledgment of his person by this seasoned cobbler was more than the praises of courtiers he had known.

‘I am sure the Great Day is not far off,’ he said, bowing again. ‘I am sure, Pequey, that we shall meet in the new world.’

‘It is a world which has not served you well,’ said the cobbler, ‘and doubtless dragons and others will meet you in the way and seek to prevent you finding the golden egg of love.’

Balwone started at the mention of the golden egg, and his mind flashed back to the past, and he saw his recurring vision of a high mountain and a great egg on which the figure of a man was seated. His understanding of his own destiny told him that it was he who was—or would be—seated there, and yet he seemed to be viewing it from afar off, as if from the edge of a great primeval jungle, hitherto untrodden even by Man.

The cobbler saw Balwone to be as one who is in a trance, and felt he must withdraw. However, Balwone came to life and called him back.

‘I go to Flamgrid,’ he said. ‘Is there some message I can take with me to the Master?’

The cobbler shook his head. ‘Nought but my greetings and my deep affection,’ he said. ‘I must labour on in this city of Cotillon, and there be more of us, and we shall pray for you and the coming of our master, Massia. Tell Flamgrid that.’

When the cobbler had gone the knight wondered why he had felt a slight edge of unease rising within him. The manuscripts spoke wonderingly of Massia the servant of the Most High, but he had often wondered whether or not Massia were he—Balwone. Now he felt this edge of jealousy within him and it greatly disturbed his spirit. Did the cobbler Pequey know something which was hidden from him—Balwone? He worried about this.

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His next visitor was the Sheriff, and the knight wondered at his visit. It took little time for him to discover that the Sheriff’s reason for coming was a political one. Adorned with the glorious garb of his office, he was intent on impressing Balwone.

'I have come, my lord,' he said, 'to speak of things which affect both our kingdoms. Our monarch, as you know, is abroad, making arrangements for the marriage of his daughter, the prin-cess Clanlo. She is to wed prince Zenli of the kingdom of Cathrid, and we desire there shall be no disturbances in those arrangements.'

'We were greatly grieved to hear of your unjust incarceration.' He stopped speaking and made a slight bow.

'Of course, sire, you will agree that the manner of your clothing and the district in which you had chosen to live made matters difficult for us. Also the scoundrel Corsini lied to us about your person. Knowing Roget by ill repute we naturally thought of you as one of his ilk.'

He paused, assumed a fitting sorrowful expression, and then went on. 'We know better now, of course, but I have come to ask your goodwill towards our famous city of Cotillon and our great kingdom of Flagland.'

He paused and looked a trifle uncomfortable. He summoned up a gentle smile on his florid face and into his rather bulbous eyes, and made a request.

'We would be grateful if you were to return to the kingdom of Manignia and assure your king, the most noble Zagon, that we have no designs on him or his lands in this marriage of our princess Clanlo to the prince Zenli.'

Balwone had desired to go straight to Flamgrid, but the thought of returning to Manignia, to Magnion, and especially to Merphein, his mother, suddenly gripped him. He sought to hide his tears from the Sheriff, but that man detected them, with great satisfaction. He bowed low again, and was no sooner assured by Balwone that he would do this very thing than he was gone, followed by his entourage of officers. Even so, he left one of his officers to tell the fate of Corsini, namely that he was now imprisoned, his estates being confiscated, with only a meagre provision having been made for the man's wife and family. Firsini was now owner of his land and free to farm as he wished.

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The day the two set out they were farewelled by Pequey and his family. Balwone delighted in the richness of a family that had been taught some of the wisdom of the ancient sages. None looked sapient: they were just delightful, simple people, but folk with good humour and great depths of life. Roget had tears in his eyes as he was farewelled, and treasured a wallet they had specially made for him. The knight's old wallet had also been taken and a new one made in its place. Food provisions had come from the Sheriff's department, but Pequey's wife had added a rich fruit cake to their provisions.

News had been sent ahead to Firsini and his family, and they were waiting for their erstwhile labourer and the new Roget, and great was the celebration. Balwone scarcely dared raise his eyes to the beautiful Merom, and she—for her part—blushed deeply at his appearance. Even so, she welcomed him quietly and with dignity.

Firsini at first approached him as a yeoman is fain to approach a knight, but he was also emboldened by the knowledge that he was a landowner without feoff to any landlord, and impulsively he embraced the man who had—all unconsciously—become his benefactor. His wife was silent but gracious in her greeting.

Balwone knew instinctively that Corsini had been thwarted in his evil intents towards the country maiden. Even so, the unease that the dragon had inserted into his spirit kept him from full openness with the family. Also, he could not trust his feelings in regard to Merom. It was not that the memory of the princess Gothlic cast out his love and desire for the rural maid, but he wondered how he could fulfil his vision of universal love if he were drawn to a special love—such as a man has love for a maid—and so be caught in a relationship which might blot out the wider issues of which the wise men had written. It was in these things he would consult with Flamgrid and, perhaps, with Merphein.

The family appeared not to be affected by the knight's private thoughts. They had prepared a great feast for that night and had asked neighbours to come, even yeomen and some serfs and vassals with whom they were accustomed to hold fellowship. Friendship in Firsini's mind outranged and outpaced the social

conventions of his day. His recent good fortune was so immense in his eyes that he wished to have his neighbours share the joy that had come to him and the family.

Balwone wondered whether he had ever known such a delight as he found in that lively company. He realised that his days observing folk in so many cities and countries, and especially his times with the impoverished men and women of Cotillon, along with his being one with the poor and the miserable, now made him see nobility in men and women. Before, he had not recognised fully that at the heart of every human being is something that is fine and deep, however much other behaviour might seem to belie this. That a murderer could now be his close companion, and one fierce in personal loyalty, had moved him to understand the human race in a new way. It also gave him heart, for much that he had learned accorded with the wisdom of the wise men who had written in the past, passing down their inheritance so that it might be known and used in the present.

There was festivity in dancing, singing, the recitation of ancient ballads and the stories which were part of this kingdom of Flagland. He listened to the sung ballads, and his spirit was charged with delight as stories and spoken ballads were recited. He dared to dance with the daughter of Firsini, but in his heart was something of fear and he could not abandon himself to the festivities as did others. The only one who sensed his misgivings was Roget, the former murderer. It was as though this man was sensitively attuned to his new friend, and felt his destiny lay with him and the high vocation to which he had been called.

Roget was quick to see the disappointment in the beautiful blue eyes of the flaxen-haired maiden, and he sighed for her as he did for his master. Secretly he shrugged off the problem, knowing they would be gone the next day, making their way across hill and dale and through great forests until they reached the kingdom of Manignia. Then they would travel on to the farther land of Zed and the royal forest in which the famed Flamgrid pondered his manuscripts and made peerless footwear for high and low alike.

\* \* \*

That night the dragon returned. He was not alone, but had brought other creatures like him who breathed out the same fire and sought to affright the knight. Now, as the creatures saw, this man had not been weakened by his months of injustice and evil captivity, but rather he had been strengthened. Balwone thought he saw the scar of the dragon's old wound throb with the anger of the creature, and he knew deep satisfaction.

The other dragons acted as a chorus to their mighty lord, so that when he spoke they growled and agreed and they sent forth fire from their distended nostrils. As did the eyes of the old dragon glow with passion and rage, so did theirs in perfect mimicry. Balwone smelt the evil of them, but was unafraid. In his dream he had the long golden sword which he had plunged into the belly of his opponent, and when his hand strayed towards that sword he saw the eyes of the younger dragons start with fear, and even the old dragon betrayed his inner terror. Smoke rolled forth in sulphurous clouds, but Balwone knew his enemy was ineffective.

That is, until the dragon again changed, and the minor beasts with him, and he saw such a bevy of beauty and glory that his heart sank within him. This transformation of dreadful ugliness to shining beauty unnerved him, and thoughts of Merom came back to him. Even the debased creatures—the prostitutes he had seen in the Cotillon brothels—seemed, in memory, to have some innate attraction that a man cannot deny. It was, too, as though the haughty Gothlic was part of this feminine glory, and hot surges pulsed through the spirit of the virgin knight. For some moments he wondered whether his pilgrimage and pursuit of love were worth the cost and the pain. It was as though the dragon had known this, and was drawing him on to things other than his high calling.

Suddenly it struck him that he would never be free of the insinuations of the fiery beast—now become a posse of fiery beasts—until he had slain him, and on the thought he drew his golden sword and rushed forward, only to be met by the beauty of the women whom he knew he could not touch. High above him was the bellowing laughter of a thousand evil creatures, and his face flamed with his dilemma. How could he plunge a sword into

such glory and such beauty? But then he felt compelled, and lifted high his weapon, rushing to plunge it into these women who had taken up some residence in his heart and spirit.

In a flash that brought the sulphurous stench of the dragon back to him, the vision dissipated, and all that remained was emptiness on the sward in which it had stood, in the place where he had rushed forward to decimate the fleshly creatures of his dream. The horrible laughter expanded and rose in sound and insinuation, so much so, that the sweat stood out on his body and he felt oppressed by all the evil that a man might ever know. He trembled with spasms of terror and indignation, of self-reproach and anger against the insidious enemy. When he woke his bed was soaked with sweat, and he was forced to throw aside the bed coverings and go out into the night.

Crystalline it was—the night—with the high brilliance of stars that knew no moon but which were shedding celestial light over all. He saw the forms of the cattle across towards the byre, and he heard the sorrowful cry of the cattle-hounds. They, too, seemed to sense the evil that was now departing, and in his spirit they were an omen of more evil to come, more conflicts to be endured and the destruction which must come upon the world of evil before man could freely breathe in the creation about him and know the peace Massia had promised to mankind in the ancient Writings.

Long he stood in the night until the mournful howling of the hounds ceased, and even the singing crickets and the night birds lost their songs before the unfolding dawn. New and gentle songs began with the dawn birds. Soft colours flushed up into the sky to portend the coming sun, and they strengthened into brilliance until the gentle, golden ball broke over the horizon. As though actuated together, the heads of the kine swivelled towards the cause of the dawn, and a soft spirit crept into the heart of the hitherto bewildered knight. Purpose was strengthened within him, and vocation and destiny were again both confirmed.

After a time Balwone went to awaken his friend, finding him to be gathering together their belongings. The horses, which had been supplied to them by the Sheriff, were now laden with

luggage for the journey back to Manignia, and the two men stood and stared into the dawn, as though it were a significant day for their future.

They broke their fast with the family whose memory of last night still had them somewhat dazed and bemused, but by the time they bade farewell to the Firsinis, the old rural alertness had returned, and they were vigorous in their farewells and liberal in their affections. In a rare show of personal concern, Merom clung to Balwone and wept words of genuine parting. The knight was shaken by this, and could not trust himself to receive it all. For his part, he gave the maiden a long and tender look until he remembered the words concerning 'wool and flax' which Firsini had uttered those long months before. He wondered at the same time whether Firsini had in any way altered his mind, but decided to leave his thoughts in this place and not take them with him as he left. Nevertheless, there was in him a great and painful reluctance to leave.

He mounted his steed and waved farewell to the good friends he had made. Roget took the reins of the packhorse, heavily laden with the good gifts of the Firsinis, and soon they were away, over the first hill and into the grassed gully on the other side. Not until they had reached the forest did the Firsini family cease to look after them and, with a final wave, they were lost to sight as the two men entered the silent forest.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## The Meetings:

## Balwone with Merphein, Zagon and the Dragon

**T**O BALWONE it seemed many years had passed since last he had seen the Lady Merphein, his mother. He wished to hasten to her, but knew the weakness was still with both Roget and himself, even though Roget seemed so much the stronger of the two.

The knight felt the coolness of the forest closing around him, and with it came peace and an inner tranquillity. To him the forest was always a place of beauty and not merely a haven from evil centres of living, like Cotillon. He loved the life of the woods, the constant noises of birds and animals, and also the times when all rustlings subsided, all noises ceased, and when a supernal silence reigned. Those were the times of sheer tranquillity, and now he felt them and was sure they were healing him. There was much he had yet to know and he sought a sanctuary where his mind and spirit could rest. It was not an escape he desired but time for thinking, and that was where his companion was such a help.

Roget would allow him to do no work whatever, and so he would have hours in which to think and ruminate. His precious wallet was always open, and he was pondering the sapient sayings of the wisdom-men and the prophets. The more he read, the less he seemed to know, but this was not truly the case. It was simply that his eyes had been widely opened by his recent experiences, and he was learning more of the nature of his universe and—in particular—the nature of human beings, with whom he now recognised himself to be one. Time and again his mind would go back to the conversation he had had with Flamgrid when that man had sent him out into the world to see what he had

not previously seen or known. He remembered the urgency of the older man and his insistence that Balwone needed to learn more. Now he wondered what the cobbler would have to say to him.

They made their way quietly through the royal forests of the Flagland kingdom until they reached Cathrid, but the castle of his deceased father, Facius, was yet a long way off. They had yet to cross over into Manignia, the realm of Zagon and the haven of *Zagonholme*. Such calm was in himself that he did not wish to travel quickly, preferring, rather, to keep his health intact and to have constant recourse to his precious wallet of documents. He sensed the day was not far off when he would need every ounce of health and wisdom. So he would spend the time in some grassy glade, poring over his manuscripts and then looking into the blue of the clear Cathrid skies. He was gradually piecing together many of the ancient sayings, and understanding their precious wisdom. It seemed he would never come to the end of distilling it.

Roget, too, was always wanting to know more of this wisdom, and, surprisingly, showed a great ability for grasping it. Sometimes his commoner's commonsense would come to the knight's aid, especially when he was theorising about this thing or that. The former murderer was shrewd in his assessment of mankind and in his perceptions of the creation round about them. Between them they worked through many things and Balwone's spirit lightened. This more so as they made their way through the forest surrounding the castle which had always been his home, situated, as it was, outside the great city of Magnion. Even so, they did not hasten towards it, still working out the heart of the ancient wisdom and the substance of the great prophecies.

It was then the knight saw not simply the inevitability of the prophetic fulfilment, but rather the indispensability of the same. All history was moving towards its eventual climax, but somehow wisdom had ordained that it should be in a certain way. The wise men had perceived that some nations looked back to their past, being nations who had accomplished much in the time of their ancestors. So they would gaze backwards, trusting that a

new cycle would develop and the old imperialism and its success would be repeated in the present time, or the near future. This was their guiding philosophy. They were dependent upon the past; the past controlled their thinking. Nations which were rising up out of little, pursued the thought of the future—that in it would come great success; they lived on the future, in hope. Those nations which had some greatness lived in the present, but they were ever fearful that they might be conquered and their success vanquished. They had read enough of history to know there is a rise and fall in the fortunes of the kingdoms of the earth. Balwone saw that the powers that be must bring about those changes in history which would prove good for all the races. Indeed, he was seeing that mankind essentially constitutes one people, and that only love of a great magnitude could bring the various peoples to see this fact, and then to live by it. Universality had been greatly fragmented in the history of the human race. Now, he hoped, universality would gain new ground. As he saw it, only love and joy and peace could bring humanity to a coherent unity.

What encouraged, intrigued, puzzled and even angered him were the prophecies concerning Massia. This great figure loomed large in the writings of the wise ones. He also knew that it was common to many tribes and peoples to have their equivalents of Massia, the one who would come and establish peace in all the earth. The writings about these lesser Massias absorbed his attention, for he saw the principle of a man having wisdom beyond others was what set him on high. Of course, he also recognised that there was an incessant power struggle in the affairs of men, so that he who had most power would be highest in the order of things. Here wisdom could be overridden by sheer human power. His wisdom parchments told him that, in the ultimate, power would not lie in armies, weapons and human strategies, but in the power of universal love. Many hours were spent pondering this predictive claim.

It was about this love he wished to consult both Merphein and the cobbler of Zed. Even so, he knew it was not a matter for frantic haste, and disturbance of the inner spirit would prevent true understanding and consequent action.

He was intrigued because he knew something must come from the human race which would better it. He was puzzled because, knowing the deceit and treachery of a large portion of the human race, he wondered how it could be done. Finally, he was angered because somewhere in him it was as though a dragon of sorts—a tiny dragon, yet a powerful one—had been born, and was telling him that none but he, Balwone, would, and could, effect the change in human history. He wondered at the thought which often came to his mind, 'Balwone the Great'. It was as though such a name were somewhere written in history, and that it was to be the name of all names in the period of his lifetime. Such thoughts did not hearten him, but rather terrified him, or made him uneasy within his heart and conscience. No ancient manuscript verified the title 'Balwone the Great', but then much in the wisdom writings was cryptic, needing a revelation by wise scholars. He feared to ask even Flamgrid concerning such a title.

Was it true—he would ask himself—that he would be a 'great one', a man who would alter the course of the nations? The idea brought a measure of thrill and excitement to him, but another part of his mind warred with this joy which stimulated him. He would have bouts when he felt himself to be of two minds, but the division in his spirit he could not share with his henchman. Even so, sometimes he caught Roget looking wonderingly at him and he imagined in his mind that this man might have divined his true spirit, whereas he—the knight—was missing some insight which was part of the mystery of true wisdom. This thought became vagrant in the whole range of his thinking and, unexpectedly, it would visit him in the hours of the night which were the most restless.

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Suddenly—so it seemed—they were home! They came out of the forest and there was *Zagonholme*. In the sun of the midday it looked glorious in its castellated towers and battlements. It stood, thought Balwone, for that which was genuine and immutable, its

moat shining like new gold. He sat on his mount, looking across the undulating fields of green pasture, of stone fences and of grazing cattle and sheep. He had always known every inch of the beautiful demesne, and not one of the homes of the working feoffs had been unknown or foreign to him. He had always known the families—parents and children and their relatives—and had always been aware of the lot of his people. The years away would have altered little. He—like others—had grown and matured in those years. His eyes misted as he rode down the slopes and into the courtyard—the bridge of the moat having been lowered.

He sensed a certain tension in his companion, but discerned that his fellow traveller was worrying about a new situation into which he would now have to move, and he would be worrying as to whether he would be accepted by the folk of the castle. This mis-giving was dispelled when he met the Lady Merphein. She scarcely regarded him, but he knew she had discerned his character and had quietly approved. Her son she met with great affection. She made him stand back whilst she surveyed every element of him. It was years since she had last seen him, and she recognised the marks of development and maturity which had been absent from the younger Balwone—the enthusiast and idealist. Her heart throbbed with a deeper love than she had known even for her old and tender lover—Facijs—but then it was the love of mother, and in this case a mother with unusual intuition and prescience.

Yes, this was a different man, and her face glowed with the sight and measure of him. She bade them enter the castle, and in no time Balwone was recounting his experiences, as she also was speaking of the many events which had happened in his absence.

She pursed her lips as he told of the farm of Firsini and Merom, and then of Cotillon and the strange adventures in both the slums and the prison. When he spoke of the prison he did so carefully, knowing that it might distress her, but somehow she had heard, and somehow news had been sent from Manignia—indeed from Zagon himself—to the monarch of Flagland, who had directed his Sheriff to release the itinerating knight of Zagon.

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That evening there was a great feast such as Roget had not seen in his whole lifetime—not even as a servant of Corsini. The returning son was feted heavily, and his companion, Roget, was solemnly honoured. It was foretold that he would soon be squired so that he could travel with the Lord Balwone and not be merely a servant in the castle entourage. This was to be the making of the former murderer, but it was Merphein who saw what the act could do, and she appealed to Zagon to raise the man who had meant so much to her son in times of great need.

The feast had all manner of forest and farm meats and joints. Heaped panniers of food, vast dishes and deep bowls of fish, venison, beef, lamb, pork, wild fowl and domestic poultry were set out for the royal family who were to attend, and for the lords and ladies who wished to welcome back their strange but romantic knight of the royal blood. Roget was permitted to be a guest, but he hovered in the background, as though to act as a guard for his beloved master.

Balwone was still pale of features and somewhat thin of body, but he made a fine figure, especially in the sight of mothers who would willingly have wed their daughters to the famous member of Zagon's aristocracy. The young ladies themselves were taken with the romantic personage of the highest knight of the land, but some fear came to them as they viewed his features. So calm and yet so stern he seemed, and many a woman knew inner terror as it became clear that only a woman of a certain character and disposition could be a marital peer to this princely person.

In the gracious dancing that followed the first instalment of the evening feasting, the women found that he seemed to have no interest in them, and they quailed in their spirits. His eyes seemed those of a stern mystic and not of a man who looks to women for his fulfilment. Only a few of them had any desire to be wed to him, and they were women of strong mind and who were urged on in the marital hunt by possessive mothers.

For his part he was not uninterested but his eyes seemed to search their inner beings, and he was often disappointed with what he found, or rather with what he could not find.

It was after the last portion of the great supper that King Zagon drew aside the pale knight and had private conversation

with him. He had no male issue, but two daughters of great beauty, the eldest being Megafrith, and the younger, Meerheim. To Balwone's great shock the king told him he had but a little time to live. This news was not for the ears of others. His physician and wife were the only ones who knew.

King Zagon wasted little time in conversation, but came to the main point. He would like to see Megafrith and Balwone wedded, and Balwone be prepared to take over the kingdom of Manignia as soon as he—the ailing monarch—was reduced to weakness and could no longer reign effectively. So far as the king knew, there was no political manoeuvring in his kingdom. Husius, the statesman of royal blood who had long coveted the throne, was now aged, himself close to death. Zagon assured Balwone that he would be accepted as the new monarch without conflict in the kingdom. Even the announcement of an engagement would be tantamount to a declaration that the royal knight would be the successor to Zagon. In any case the Manignians were already impressed by the apprenticeship Balwone had previously served as a squire and then his winning of his knightly spurs, to say nothing of his exploits, travels and learning of the past five years or so.

Balwone was deeply moved. Although of royal blood he had never envisaged becoming the king, and his heart sank for he did not believe himself to be one who should rule the realm. It was not that he doubted his ability to do this, but he did not see it as his destiny. As for wedding Megafrith, he found no heart for such a union. Even this night when he had danced with her who was a distant relative of his family, he had sensed no link between them, and he doubted that Megafrith herself would desire such a union. Like her father she was a pleasant, robust person, but she lacked the grace of royalty and preferred life to be quiet—outside the stream of publicity and the constant gaze of courtiers and the common people.

He begged the king to give him time. He wondered how he could escape to Flamgrid and receive some sort of guidance from his former tutor, but his heart told him the monarchy was not his destiny. Perhaps a monarchy of a different kind—the kind that would befit Massia—might suit him, but since it was so

different he could not see himself in the role of the ruler of Manignia.

The king sensed Balwone's lack of response. His mind roved, seeking to find another knight who would fit the throne of Manignia, but he could find none. With a sigh he resolved to wed Megafrith to one of his older statesmen, a younger brother of Husius who lacked Husius's passion for the throne but who might be the better monarch because of that.

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There were days given over to jousting and other tournaments, to the entertainment provided by itinerant jesters and clowns, and there were the hours of music provided by the players of the royal court. Balwone itched to get away into the kingdom of Zed and meet his old mentor, but protocol demanded he not only stay but also take part in the jousting and other games. He had no feeling for such events and felt he was too weak to participate in them.

Zagon himself urged the son of Facius to test his old skills with the young men who were coming up into knighthood. At first Balwone had no taste for this, but once the sports began and he participated, he felt the old urge return, and he called up the strength he had and gave good battle with his lance and made strong use of his sword. His aim with the bow and spear did not fail him for Flamgrid had taught him forest cunning, and he was cheered on by the noble folk in the pavilion. It was in body to body wrestling that he felt his weakness, but this he made up in the use of martial art, and on the whole acquitted himself well.

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One night the dragon returned. It was as a new creature. The scar of Balwone's former onslaught was discernible, but the creature had healed and was in high spirits, burning with wrath and dark accusations against the saintly knight. 'Saintly' was not a word Balwone would have used, but the dragon hauled it out of some pit of his mind as though it had enraged him time and again. His

scales shone with golden beauty, his eyes never wavered before the gaze of the knight, and his nostrils shed forth plumes of smoke and fire such as Balwone had not previously witnessed.

'You would think of yourself as saintly! You would be as Massia! You have a high regard for yourself and you claim a destiny above that of other earthly creatures! Shame on you, since within, you are foul and unclean. You claim purity, but your mind is a pit of uncleanness. You would spurn the kingdom of Manignia for some dream conceived in the heart of your pride, and the pride of your heart.

'Let be, creature of Facius and Merphein, and humble yourself to be a true mortal. Have you not conceived enough creatures more vile than I am, and will they not issue forth in the hour of your judgment? Vain aspirations you have, and you will trample down many in order to fulfil them.'

As Balwone looked with dread and astonishment, a host of dragons that looked like dreadful wraiths, and pale imitations of the ghastly creature himself, wreathed themselves about the accusing dragon, and let their baleful eyes stare accusingly at him.

To his quiet amazement a strange event took place. On other occasions he had fought with his mind and human indignation the accusations of the creature, but this time a steady calm possessed him and he simply looked directly into the eyes that had rolled with scorn and with vituperations. As he gazed, unmoved, he saw some kind of terror grip his supernatural opponent. For some time he remained without movement, and he saw the rage die in the creature, and the plumes of smoke and fire diminish to curling wisps of dying conflagration. The fetid smell of the creature seemed to be neutralised, and in its place flowed a wholesome fragrance that brought even more fear to the dragon. The eyes glazed, and it seemed the enormous body began to sag.

At Balwone's side there had been no sword, for all this was a vision, but he felt a movement and, looking down, saw the golden sword that sometimes came to him in such visions, and he took the sword and advanced on the serpent. The sheen of its coat was gone and the gold of it had turned to a sickly green. With a quiet joy in his heart Balwone advanced on it and, as he

strode towards it, drew his golden sword from its sheath. Before he could get to it, the dragon had faded into nothing, and with it the various imitatory forms, at first becoming thin wraiths and then disappearing in a ghostly mist until he alone—Balwone—stood in the midst of some forest glade.

As he stared, almost in unbelief, the vision of the jungle-forest and the high mountain appeared before him, and in the late westerling sun he saw a person outlined in black, brooding over a great egg which seemed to have the colour of gold. It was a long way off and Balwone could not be sure it was gold, but some sense told him that this was the case.

As the sun faded so did this second vision, and Balwone awoke on his bed. This time he was not sweating, and the inner disturbance he had known on other occasions was absent. What he could not understand was the neutral calm he felt. He wondered whether the dragon had left yet another layer of his evil upon him, but of this he could not be certain. He returned to a sleep which was dreamless, and on the morrow he and Roget would prepare for their journey to Flamgrid in the forests of the kingdom of Zed—the suzerainty of Gothroyd, whose gracious and beautiful daughter was the princess Gothlic.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Pilgrimage to the Cobbler–Sage

While at *Zagonholme* Balwone had taken opportunities for meeting with Merphein and discussing the matters of the king's request, and so his own feelings in regard to the royal desire, the proposed marriage with Megafriith and the future rule of Manignia. In all of these elements Merphein was sympathetic towards his driving desire to have time with Flamgrid and somehow come to terms with his future. He was unswerving in his conviction that his destiny lay in seeking to heal mankind of its ills and of uniting the warring kingdoms. So he talked long with his beloved mother and sometimes they conversed earnestly into the small hours of the morning.

He deeply valued his mother's intuition and discernment for something within himself resonated when she would tell him her thoughts over the many years of his life.

'Your father, Facius, was a man of peace. Doubtless he did fight for our kingdom from time to time, but his counsels for peace with the people our former Zagons conquered were always wise ones. He—like yourself—was a reader of the ancient wisdom, and he believed the day would come when good sense would prevail and kings and governors would sit down and seek ways of bringing peace to the lands of the earth.

'You, Balwone, were born with difficulty, not because I was older in age at your birth than are most women, but because portents of a proper kind surrounded your coming. I was always certain that one day you would be a great servant of Massia, the one whom the prophets have ever said must come at the

appropriate moment when the Most High would vindicate his name as the Creator of all things.

'There was conflict, also, with the evil powers that incite men and women to hatred, to jealousy, to greed and to murder. Evil portents also appeared, and predictions were made that you would die in my womb and that Facius and I would be hence-forth childless. Such prophecies proved to be wrong, but the fact that dark powers were concerned about your birth verified the true predictions that you would be a son to the Most High and servant to his messenger, Massia.

'So I have ever sought to pray for you that you reach the goal and destiny that is laid out for you. In my own way I have fought the dragons of the evil kingdom that seek to thwart the intentions of the Maker of the Universe. Often I have resisted, and even—it seemed—to death.'

Her deep, violet eyes rested in love and compassion on her son, who was now staring at her in amazement. Such things she had never revealed to him. He had thought of her as an unmovable and competent woman, and he sorrowed to know she had suffered so much for his sake. In some way his mind was beginning to understand why women know such high nobility of being. This he had seen in Gothlic—the princess-daughter of Gothroyd—and in Merom, whose beautiful simplicity yet held within it a depth of understanding that may well have surpassed his own. Indeed, it was dawning on him that male wisdom and female wisdom were made to meet and become one, and that neither could be completely whole without the other.

'Have the powers of darkness attacked you on my behalf?' he asked. 'Is there an evil which pursues its own ends and designs, and would it attack and hurt you for my sake?'

She said quietly, 'There is no such thing as an evil in itself. All evil is of creatures who have reason. The wills of some who are created divine or created human are against the Most High, for they desire his place in the order of things. Hence they seek in rivalry to emulate him, and then go beyond what he is, and filch his powers from him. Their driving force is desire for power, and for all who stand in their way or go contrary to their desires there is great rage.'

She paused, and again bent on him her look of love and compassion. ‘Some of these things I learned from your father, Facius, and some from his writings, but most have come down in my family through the centuries, and we—it would seem—have always been destined to be servants of the Most High and to oppose his enemies by our ways of living.’

‘Are not creatures such as dragons and ghouls but the expression of our own evil hearts?’ he asked.

She smiled gently and said, ‘These things are beyond my knowing. Flamgrid may aid you in coming to understand such matters. As for me, no dragons find their home in me, though it is not for the lack of warring and of their attempts to defeat me and take away the holiness that is the true joy of the human spirit.’

She smiled again, and for the first time he saw her weariness and fragility of body, though no weakness in her moral and spiritual powers.

Then she said, ‘Balwone, you must be on your way. It is destined in the wisdom of this Most High that we meet not again in this world. My time is drawing near when I must go beyond this life, and the fact troubles me little. I am sure that somehow beyond this life we will have powers that affect the present movements of kings and governors in the leading of their kingdoms.’

It was then he saw the passion in her eyes and the love he had known in no other. It was love of a kind that often shamed him in regard to his own. Hers was a pure love, and he greatly longed to ask her regarding it. In the years that followed he deeply regretted not asking her the secret of its being. Even now he knew he feared what she would tell him and wondered whether he would be able to understand her. Like Facius, she had a spirit that loved him but which evaded his perception. This fact troubled him deeply, but he could only admire its presence as he had seen it in both his parents.

‘Tell me, Mother,’ he said gently, ‘can it be that all men and women are of one origin and therefore of one substance? The ancients say that some seemed fated to be evil and do evil, and that others are fated to be good and do good, yet I find within me that I do not have a goodness which is there of itself. Something

within me wars with me and I must always be on the alert to defeat that which is evil.’

‘It is the mind,’ she said. ‘The mind to do good is with some and the mind to do evil with others. It is a mystery I do not understand. Perhaps Flamgrid will help in this matter. I know that from your birth we knew you were destined to do that which is truly great, and not simply what men call great. Even so, we saw you were often of two minds, and that although the good mind overcame the other, yet for you it was ever a battle.’

He saw her tired eyes brighten and her brow grow smooth again. ‘We trained you in all things. Discipline is the mark of greatness. He who will not accept it will always fail in the end, though he seem successful in the interim of living. No: we sought to instil within you a love of good and a hatred for the evil. It is just as I have said: evil is not a thing such as a cloud, or an influence such as lightning, but it is something embedded within the core of a person’s heart or mind.’

‘It will show itself,’ said Balwone, ‘just as I see dragons and other loathsome creatures, but I hate them and would destroy them.’

He was not sure his mother understood him. Her eyes grew dreamy again, and he feared it was with the relinquishing of the battle of this life and a desire to be beyond it with its conflicts and its passions.

‘It is *why* we would destroy them that matters,’ she said. ‘If we long for perfection for its own sake, then we will fiercely kill that which mars our perfection. It may be that the killing of our dragons may mean the release of creatures much more dreadful since they appear as golden knights with splendid dreams. But they may become monarchs of tyranny, and force their dreams and ideals on men and women who resist them, knowing them to be not of the truth.’

Balwone felt his inner being become as jelly, and it quivered and trembled. He could scarcely voice his thoughts.

‘But all goodness is good,’ he said, ‘no matter what its source may be.’

‘It is the source that determines its quality,’ his mother said, and he could see she was weary, even to the death that must soon

come. 'Facius and I sought to raise up within you the gifts of compassion and love, and to make you tender towards the wayward, generous towards the jealous and forgiving towards the enemy—no matter how he dealt with you.'

Balwone's mind flew to Corsini and similar men and women he had met who had been persons of injustice and personal greed. He thought of the humiliation of Merom and the similar evil he had seen in others, and he marvelled at his mother's words.

'To forgive an enemy,' he asked, 'is that the way of true love?'

She seemed almost too tired to love, as though somewhere within her was a disappointment with which she could not contend.

He thought, 'Perhaps my questions are giving her pain. I must ask no more of them. Not of her, anyway. I must ask Flamgrid. Happily, he may know.'

He smiled at his mother. 'Roget and I must be on our way. We will send messages to you by couriers, and will let you know how we fare.'

This time her joy seemed to have returned and her age sat lightly upon her. He saw her violet eyes had cleared of their deep trouble and that she was radiant beyond her usual wont.

'Your father and I gave you all we had,' she said, and her voice was vibrant. 'We have had pity for our human race and for this world in which we live. We trained you for such hours as these, that you might lead our race into peace and prosperity which all will know, and out of the serfdom of some and the dominance of others. We—our whole race—are a family and we are all brethren; we are all brothers and sisters, and love must therefore prevail.'

He restrained himself from asking further questions. All her statements raised questions for which he had not yet discovered the answers. Now he felt he must leave the matter, but he grieved because he knew he would not see her again. This was the way his lot was cast and, because he loved her dearly, he was content to let it be that way.

She smiled in the peaceful way which had always drawn out his love. He embraced her and received her blessing upon his

head as he bowed before her. Then he rose from his knees, looked deeply into her eyes and said simply, 'I love thee. Thou art the most beautiful and noble of all women. Thou hast done all for me that is within thy power and ability. I pray I may not fail thee.'

The faint look of trouble within her eyes was like a painful shaft in his inwards, but he concealed the pain, bowed again and withdrew to where Roget was waiting for him with two sturdy mounts and a heavy draught gelding which was laden for the journey and venture of the two. Roget was in his squire's apparel, and the two made their way across the drawbridge to the accompaniment of cheers and cries from the castle entourage. Roget carried the banner of *Zagonholme*, which would give them passage through the kingdoms they would pass. His head was held high and he did not look back. At the end of the drawbridge Balwone turned his horse and faced his mother and the gathered servants and soldiers. He raised his hand high, wheeled the horse again, and the two made their way rapidly across the undulating pastures, not pausing until they reached the edge of the forest. Here they turned again, and Balwone felt the tears stinging his eyes as the castle misted before them and the figure of his mother was lost. 'Lost forever!' thought Balwone, but he had been trained against tears and he smiled at Roget. Together they plunged into the Zagon forest through which they must pass before they made their way into the forest of Paelfric's kingdom and finally reached that of Zed where Flamgrid would be waiting for them. The thought of the cobbler cheered the heart of the knight who had refused a kingdom and a queen, and whose heart was strangely confused because of the last conversation with his mother.

This confusion remained for some days. He would think through the late conversation about love, and often his head would droop as they rode, but then some creature of the forest would cross their path and his eyes would light up. The whirring of a pheasant in the undergrowth, or a lark singing unseen in the heights of the blue above, would bring him out of his mental trance and he would be Balwone again—the Balwone whom Roget both admired and loved. So relief would come to his sturdy companion.

The mingled joy and pain of these days were never to be forgotten by the knight. They remained ever in his memory as true days of joy, albeit some pain was mingled with them. During the nights when they lay in the open and looked up at the mysterious shining worlds above them, or the nights when the moon was in full bloom, a golden orb that hung in a purple sky, and all the night creatures came out to woo and win its beauty, memories of the women he had known would return to make that moon a thing of honeyed beauty and mystery. The night songs and the night cries set his blood flowing with joy, and he and Roget would talk endlessly, the beauty of the night having loosed their tongues, and then, wearied by it all, and sedated by the mead they carried in leather bottles, they slept until the sun was high in the heavens.

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Balwone was aware that his companion, though untalkative by nature, was constantly asking questions, probing the knight so that he might understand his thinking and—where common sense could clear away troublesome theories and futile ideals—bring earthly reality to the man he admired. He asked about the quest and intentions of the knight once he had met with Flamgrid and resolved his present questions.

It was on a night when the moon had faded and the stars were anticipating a clear dawn, that Balwone spoke.

‘We have much to do,’ he said. ‘There is pain, injustice, inequality and selfishness in this world. There must be a love that will banish this cruelty and bring warmth and comfort to men and women. The ancients opined that this would be so, that one day a great one would come who would right what is wrong and bring this fair comfort to the suffering and oppressed of our race.’

Roget nodded as he stared into the heavens. ‘Such dreams must take place in our race or all would become evil or harsh and despairing. Such ideas help to keep our society on an even keel.’

He turned his gaze away from the stars and looked towards Balwone who was also prone upon the forest floor. ‘Such ideas,’ he continued, ‘keep knights as knights, serfs as serfs and all

things as they have ever been. Dreams that promise much are as a drug to our spirits and help us to endure the pains we have in our days upon the earth.’

Balwone was startled by his companion’s utterance. ‘Then you do not believe in the coming of Massia and the liberation of all from oppression and bondage?’

‘I have long ago come to terms with oppression and bondage,’ said the new squire. ‘I think thy coming has given me hope that it will be lessened, but then men such as thee are rare, and the things thou sayest are not the mind of the human race. The wise men whom we read were rich in ideas, and we acknowledge their wisdom, but such men grow up closeted, and doubtless they share their hopes and aspirations. No: things will always be much as they are.’

‘Do you not believe the ancient prophecies, the words that came from the Most High?’

‘Of them I have but little knowledge,’ said Roget. ‘If they rightly be prophecies from the Most High, then first I must know that great deity and understand his mind, and why he should make a world which can have such pain and suffering, and then determine to relieve it. I somehow must come to know his mind.’

‘Knowing that mind,’ said Balwone, ‘will you then believe in his goodness and the grace he will show to this human race?’

‘I know not whence prophecies come,’ said Roget. ‘I have listened to thee reading, and I wonder whether such sayings do not rise from the hearts of good men who long to bring peace to all others.’

He paused. ‘I who was once a murderer was such by compulsion, but had I learned from these wise men that I could have denied the demands of my former master Corsini if I had been prepared for his curses, his beatings and his disfavour, then I do not know that I would have opposed him in the name of right-eousness. In those days I could not abide such suffering. Now I might well even welcome suffering in the cause of true justice.’

‘If you admit to such a thing as true justice,’ said Balwone triumphantly, ‘then you are saying there is a reality such as goodness. Can it not be that such will triumph in the form of our great deliverer Massia, the promised One?’

Balwone's companion sighed. 'It is when thou dost argue in such vein that I am lost. Thy thoughts seem too high for me. They go over my head as does the moon when she sails on her way. For me, that which is nearest is most real, and that which is enjoyed is most dear. I applaud the dreams and desires of the sages of our history and I pray that the prophecies may be true. As for their truth, I know not. Yet I am prepared to follow thee to the death for the truth thou believest. Thy truth is my truth so far as I am concerned.'

The knight was mightily moved by such personal loyalty. He would dearly have loved Roget to acclaim what he—Balwone—was saying, and to hold it as truth also for himself, but he could not ask this. As it was, he was sure his companion would one day come to see things as he was seeing them.

They both lay awake for hours and both remained silent. The unease that often visited Balwone these days was upon him. No dragon or other creature appeared, but since he was not asleep he could not expect that. Within him—apart from the unease—there was no other movement. Finally he slept, knowing that the next day they would be approaching the kingdom of Zed, perhaps even entering it. His last thoughts, as he drifted into sleep, were of the noble Gothlic, but dreams did not come, and with that he was content.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Balwone, Gothlic and the Tournament

**B**ALWONE was filled with the energies of life such as he had not known in many months. Around him the forest seemed to abound with a mysterious power and joy. The various greens of the forests—the different leafed trees, the swards of swaying grasses, the flowering shrubs and the soft herbs—seemed to flow with a new glory. No less the life of the woods, the animals and the birds. Larks trilled from higher than ever and their music fell down in layers of soft music. Songsters in the trees tried to outdo them and bluebells and buttercups nodded silent symphonic agreement.

The knight felt the latent power of the steed beneath, caparisoned with the royal colours of Manignia, and as he tightened the reins the proud head of his mount was held high, nodding as it pressed forward in trained step. Roget seemed also to be in good mood and his mount in fine fettle. The third horse followed obediently, plodding in step with the other animals, its reins attached to Roget's mount. Balwone felt his heart near to bursting, as was also his mind, because of new streams of thought which, unbidden, came flowing through from some outside source. It seemed as if destiny had come to life in a new way, taking the two men towards some great and wonderful goal. Any lethargy they may have known was swallowed up in the joy of life and the peace which goes with such a mind. Balwone was thinking with pleasure on a world to come which would hold no strife—a world as calm and beautiful as the one in which he was moving. He considered their present mood a good one to have,

and one in which to meet Flamgrid and discuss those matters which were of the greatest importance.

That is how they progressed until they heard the baying of hounds, the blowing of trumpets and the cries of a company approaching. Confident that they would not meet enemies, and secure in the knowledge that his passage into the kingdom of Zed was approved and sealed, Balwone rode a little ahead of the other two horses. It was then that he espied the royal entourage of Gothroyd, king of Zed. He could recognise this by the banner emblazoned with the escutcheon depicting the armorial bearing of the monarch of Zed. Its brilliant crimson and white contrasted well with the rich greens of the forest trees and grasses. The jingling of equestrian equipage, the sounds of hounds baying and the laughter and cries of the entourage stirred his blood afresh. How wonderful it was to be alive and part of a humanity which had made its way bravely down through many millenniums. The very sun from the blue arches above seemed to beat down equivalent joy as he urged his mount towards the coming company.

As it drew near, the knight perceived that Gothroyd was not present. It was the princess Gothlic who was riding proudly at the head. He felt his cheeks suffuse with colour and his heart begin to throb with a feeling hitherto foreign to him. She was dressed in royal finery and his blood rose and moved at the sight of her beauty, her calm assurance and her regal dignity that displayed no haughty spirit.

He did not dismount, but bowed low on his horse. Roget—as was required—dismounted and stood at attention by his horse. The princess gave him a nod to set him at ease. Then she turned back to Balwone. For him she had a gentle but polite smile and greeting.

‘Welcome, Prince of Manignia,’ she said. ‘We are glad to see you in our forest and to know that you are seeking out our famous cobbler.’

Balwone found himself tongue-tied. He could but bow slightly in return.

Gothlic came to the point. ‘We are led to believe that you are to wed the fair Megafriith, and that the time is close for you to be

the king of Manignia. We offer our congratulations and friendship in this new venture.’

Balwone could not be sure that the tone of his questioner did not have something of a mocking note in it. He shook his head.

‘There are other things but marriage which confront me, Your Highness,’ he said, ‘and they must be resolved before thoughts of marriage can be entertained.’

If she had mocked him, then the banter disappeared from her speech. ‘What things are so important?’ she asked. ‘So important that Flamgrid must be enquired of?’

Again, he felt tongue-tied. How could he answer this lady who confronted him with the most personal things of his life, when his own heart seemed to place them second to her person-age?

‘If it please Your Highness,’ he said, ‘I find it difficult to discuss such things in the presence of others.’

She stared at him, and he feared that he may somehow have insulted her, but then she smiled, leaned forward, gave a familiar pat to the neck of her steed, and said, ‘We have come to meet the knight of Zagon and to welcome him to our lands. His exploits, his wisdom and his purposes are well known to us, therefore we have also come to offer him a time of hospitality before he further penetrates this great forest to find his friend, the sage.’

He sat silent for a moment, and before he could reply, she said, ‘It is the time of jousting, the time of the tournaments, and you would honour our days of sport and entertainment if you would agree to participate and compete with other knights of the kingdoms of Cathrid and Zed.’

For a moment his heart sank. He had been counting the days and hours until he should meet his old mentor. Now this was to be delayed, but as he looked on the beauty of the fair Gothlic he knew there was an important matter to settle. Somehow she was linked with his inner thoughts and his mission on which he was soon to move. All her fair womanliness stirred him deeply. The image of Merom which was often in his mind now faded in the presence of this superb and royal woman, and he found himself—albeit stumblingly—accepting the invitation, and even being glad of it.

In his quiet way Roget was watching the countenance of the princess and assessing her character and intentions. He had a fierce jealousy for his lord and he became convinced this woman loved his master and had an admiration for him which she was skilfully concealing from the unsuspecting Balwone. This knight, for his part, was amazed and somewhat gratified that the royal entourage had come out to meet them. So then—on his acceptance of the invitation—the entire company turned around and headed towards the palace of King Gothroyd. Balwone had been motioned forward by the princess so that he now rode on her left, and they were able to converse until they arrived at the royal city.

Long before they reached it the two travellers saw the signs of pageant and festivity. Pavilions in festival colours had been built to host the attendants and horses of the visiting nobles. The castle itself was built to give hospitality to visitors at the highest level. Everywhere servants were attending their guests, and Balwone was ushered across the drawbridge and into the city and palace of Gothroyd. Roget was permitted to see his master to his quarters, after which he was quartered among the other squires.

When the evening came Balwone was conducted to the great festival refectory, and there—as had been the case at *Zagon-holme* on the occasions of its celebrations—the great tables of dark oak timbers were laid out with exotic food of all kinds, including the joints of many animals, and vegetables, fruit and sweetmeats, to say nothing of the great tureens of punch and other drinks. Guests were greeting each other with cries of delight or with boisterous camaraderie. The women—more gracious than the men—were wonderfully adorned and moved with aplomb in the midst of their peers. Some of the royal hounds lay silently against the walls, expecting their favourite titbit which would come to them from the feast. Servants, equipped to minister fine hospitality, moved skilfully amongst the guests, offering food and drinks as a preliminary to the great feast.

Beholding all this festivity and social amity, Balwone wished heartily, but secretly, that he could be with his dear friend Flamgrid, for he had little stomach for royal pomp and circumstance, and something within him writhed when he thought of the starving ones of the many cities in which he had been and of

many in countrysides where he had seen the strained faces made gaunt by poverty and starvation and famine. Such memories came almost with accusation, and the joy of life he had felt as he had journeyed with Roget through the royal forests now faded in the presence of this luxurious festivity.

Gothlic had seen his looks before he could conceal them and she was not smiling as she came towards him. She held out her hand over which he bowed, and the upper side of it which he kissed gently.

‘My Lord Balwone is grieved at the sight of such royal prosperity?’ she asked. There was no anger in her tone, and he thought he detected a note of sympathy, perhaps even approval. He wondered at her perception of him. So moved was he that he decided to answer her questions of the afternoon’s reception.

‘Your Highness,’ he said gently, ‘I am grateful for such generous hospitality. It was—and is—more than I had ever hoped to deserve, but it is true that amidst all this joy and festivity pictures have come into my mind of the starving children and their families in many a land in which I have been. I know one must eat, whether in royal or common fashion, or one may not then live, but is it wrong to long for the day when all will have enough, and so all may live and enjoy our wonderful world?’

She gave a slight nod of agreement.

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘we would all wish that. However, that time will come ever so slowly, and meanwhile we must live as our ancestors have designed the means and modes of such existence. The societies they have built are not easily to be displaced, not, anyway, without discomfort and suffering, and who knows whether—in the end—any lasting good will have been achieved by the changes our ideals might demand.’

He perceived she was wholly sincere, and so he did not question her reasoning, much as it raised many questions he would gladly have discussed with her. He also longed to have peace and amity with her, even if only for these few moments. He longed earnestly that she should not move on from him to others, dispensing her momentary favours of conversation and attention to other guests. He had a wild desire to lead her away from the crowded hall to some quiet and private place, and there so talk

with her that he would discover the depths of her mind and share his own destiny. An even wilder thought came to him and, as it came, it built quickly into a desire that possessed him utterly. It was the wish that she might become his life companion and share his life as Merphein had shared hers with the gentle and strong Facius, his father.

At that moment the splendidly garbed master of ceremonies, by means of a peal of silver trumpets, called all to attention for the entrance of Gothroyd and his queen, Mabila. Silence fell over the assembly, and Balwone felt a thrill run through him, for Gothlic stood so close to him that the fragrance of her Eastern scents and the warmth of her partnering him brought tears of joy into his eyes. The royal couple were proceeding towards their daughter and there was a sigh of admiration from the company of guests.

With dignity, but with personal warmth, Balwone was greeted by the king and his queen. Gothroyd drew the knight to himself, and his wife claimed her daughter, and the four proceeded to the head table where waiters bowed them to royal seating. Balwone found himself on the left of the king, as Mabila and Gothlic were on his right. Gothroyd stood to give a welcome to all guests and those who would participate in the celebrations of the next few days. The nobles present were then invited to be seated and begin the feasting.

Balwone waited until he was addressed by the courteous king, and then he gave the greetings of his own sovereign—Zagon—and so began an interesting conversation. Gothroyd was of the same mind as Gothlic, that Balwone would soon be king in the kingdom of Manignia, and was surprised to hear this was not the case. Balwone's visit to Flamgrid he easily understood, but he asked the knight about his future. Whilst Balwone conversed he gathered an intimation that he would always be warmly welcomed in Zed, and he wondered for a moment whether this was an implied invitation to become part of Gothroyd's family. He knew political alliances of this kind were the order of his day, and indeed he wondered who there were whom Gothlic could wed. The very thought made his pulses race and he became flushed of face.

It was then the sneering face of the dragon appeared to him. Of course it came out of his memory, but its coming was enough to confuse him. It was as though his thoughts were scrambled, his joy dissipated and his accustomed peace invaded and almost shattered. He wanted to rise and draw his sword, but of course at that point he had none, and no golden weapon appeared at his side. He could hear himself being addressed by the king and he heard himself answering perfunctorily, but the vision of the dragon was too strong to be denied. Anger arose in him and, for a moment, he rose from his seat, at which point the vision dissolved, but the smell of sulphur and the sound of mocking laughter lingered for some moments. Relieved of the vision, he forced himself into strong conversation with Gothroyd but in the depths he remained troubled.

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Following the feast—a meal which lasted some hours—the musicians began the tuning of their instruments, and then the dancing began. Balwone had always loved such music and the dances of his time, which were gracious enough to draw out his sense of delight. Under the music, and especially in the first dance accorded to him by Gothlic, his memories of the dragon faded and he was in a quiet joy as the two circled the floor. There were others, of course, but for this moment he was oblivious to them. So, it seemed, was Gothlic. The custom was not to talk during the tour of the dance, and with this protocol both seemed pleased.

When, however, they were seated, the princess talked animatedly. Again she asked regarding Balwone's affections for the princess Megafriith, and he asked counter-questions about her future. He noticed that her royal indifference had melted and she was a woman speaking to a man for whom she had a warm regard and an obvious respect. He was able to talk of his yearning for the kind of wisdom which would enable him to fulfil his vocation, and at times he caught flashes of looks which reminded him deeply of Merphein. At the same time he wondered—with

some feelings of despair—whether Gothlic could really comprehend the destiny which had been laid out for him.

The continuance of the couple together was soon finished. Balwone was linked with others, either in conversation with knights or in dancing with the ladies of the aristocracy among the guests. In a way he endured the conversations shared and the questions asked of him, but he longed for the evening to finish, and to be back in his room with his thoughts, with candlelight by which he could read and meditate.

It was not until early morning that the great supper ended and guests were assisted to their rooms by servants. When Balwone bid goodnight to his royal hosts, his gaze lingered on Gothlic and he sensed the royal three were not displeased. Even so, his spirit was in confusion, and he was glad to regain his room and lie on the great canopied bed. His desire to meditate fell victim to his weariness and he awoke only when a servant brought him breakfast and hot water and towels for his toilette. His head ached—probably because of the drinks served for supper and the confusion of his present thoughts. After a time the aching passed and he was ready for the celebrations which would begin in the afternoon.

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The knights were dressed in their armour for the jousting and other tournament games. Banners and flags adorned the sections where they were gathered for the events. Again Balwone's blood was stirred by the champing horses, the metallic sounds of harness and armour, the cries of friends greeting one another and the commands to servants which rang within the pavilions. Minstrels were playing music as a background to the events, songs roman-tic, passionate and martial being sung whilst the master of ceremonies was constantly crying aloud, bringing people to attention and the events to their commencement.

There were two forms of entertainment, the first the melee—the mock battle between two bodies of armed horsemen—and the second the jousting, when two horsemen would charge each other with their lances, one seeking to dismount the other. On

this occasion knights of Cathrid and Zed challenged each other as two groups, and Balwone, being of neither kingdom, watched their furious tussle as they charged, regrouped and charged again, each time seeking to unhorse their opponents. When unhorsed the knights would retire from the battle until the remain-ing combatants claimed the victory.

When the time came for jousting, Balwone had as his support his own squire, Roget. This day was to be a single elimination contest in which the knight who was unseated would have to retire, and the victorious combatant would not immediately face another opponent but would wait in his pavilion for the next opportunity, so that no one jousting was tired when he took up arms again.

Balwone enjoyed the tournament because injury and killing were forbidden. The use of pointed swords, heavy maces, daggers and clubs was also forbidden. What was so exciting was the skilful use of lances, the handling of the mount and the quick remounting before the contestant could be pinned down by the other's lance. Squires were there to help their masters remount quickly.

Balwone could not remember having been unseated in many years, but he knew he was older than some of these fierce con-testants and wondered how he would fare. Each knight and his squire would wear devices in order to see that fair play was done. Here all horses were brilliantly caparisoned, and the knight from Maignia enjoyed the sights and sounds of the tournament, especially as Gothlic was in the royal box watching the melee and then the jousting.

When it was his turn, Balwone rode out and met his oppo-nent. Both bowed to each other in the centre of the tournament turf, then wheeled about and retired to their respective ends. At the blast of the trumpets they came thundering towards each other, lances ready for the tilt. The Zagon knight loved the sound of galloping hooves and the reverberations they caused, and something sang within him. His old skill seemed to return, and whilst the lance of the other was held high, Balwone kept his tilted and, true to his old form, he avoided his opponent's thrust and galloped past, having almost unseated his opponent. His

steed was trained to twist—almost to cavorting—and so the other rider was startled into lowering his lance before thrusting down-wards with it. Even so, he wheeled rapidly, but Balwone had turned before him and was on him before he could raise his lance. With a quick parry and thrust he caused the other to be off balance and to fall.

Quick as a flash the other knight's squire assisted him to remount, but before he could drive again at Balwone he had again been unseated, and this time the man of Manignia had his lance pressed towards the neck of his opponent. No physical harm was allowed, but the knight acknowledged defeat, and the crowd cheered. Balwone cantered back to his pavilion, passing by the royal stand, to which he bowed and saluted with raised javelin.

In his next opponent Balwone encountered a knight whose device he had not known. The man was huge and his steed was necessarily large. Even so, it was quick and steady, and Balwone sensed he was facing a formidable foe—not that jousting was for wounding, and to the death. Balwone felt a quickening of his pulses when he met with his opponent before wheeling about to retire and prepare for the charge.

Somehow the music had stopped, the minstrelsy quietened, as though the watching audience knew they were facing a bout of importance. It had been many years since the knight from Manignia had been unhorsed, but it happened at the first charge by the strong knight.

In a flash Roget was at Balwone's side, helping him up with his heavy armour, but the other knight wheeled to charge back, and had the squire not been alert then Balwone could not have remounted. With his great strength Roget half-lifted him on to the mount and Balwone swung his horse away to miss the thundering charge. He wheeled again to face the fresh charge and kept his lance at the tilt. As it connected with the other knight Balwone was nearly again unhorsed by the shuddering impact. Again he wheeled and charged the knight before he was properly established on his steed. To Balwone's astonishment, the other knight slid from his horse, falling heavily. Instantly Balwone was upon him, but the other squire stood between the knight and his opponent—something not permitted by the rules of jousting.

Balwone turned his horse and swung around the squire, thrusting his lance at the half-risen knight.

There was a tremendous roar from that man, who leapt to his horses, aided by his squire, but mainly by his own tremendous strength. He wheeled his horse so that it backed on to Balwone's mount, and swinging rapidly again brought up his javelin to unseat Balwone. Balwone had thundered off on his steed and turned again to charge his enemy. They met head-on and there was a mighty clash. Every bone of Balwone's body was jarred, but he thrust time and again at the other man. The watching audience sent up cheer after cheer, and the music and singing became strong and martial.

Balwone's blood was fired and so was that of the unknown knight. Balwone worked his horse backwards and forwards, slewed it, turned it, drew off and then charged in. The other knight was open-visored, roaring his wrath. Lifting his lance high he charged mightily at the man from Manignia and missed, Balwone pulling his horse aside. Balwone charged after his opponent and, as he turned, he tilted his spear upwards and the great knight slewed in the saddle and fell. Before his squire could reach him, Balwone had his lance at the throat of the other, and that man lifted his hand in surrender.

The applause was deafening but Flamgrid's disciple found no joy in it. He wanted to speed away from it all, for he hated the rising of the blood in his body and the killing he felt he would have done had the rules not forbidden it. From that point on-wards he had no heart for the jousting but knew he had a responsibility to continue it. He won his bouts, and had to be rewarded, and so the music played loudly, martially, as he rode towards the royal pavilion.

It was the princess Gothlic who awarded him his trophy: a pair of silver spurs. His visor was open, and his eyes met those of the princess. He noticed she was not smiling. Indeed her face was stern and, if anything, a trifle sad.

'Our knight from Manignia is valiant in war,' she said, and she handed him the spurs.

He knew no one could hear them. 'Your Royal Highness,' he said softly, 'I could wish I were not receiving these spurs. The

jousting brings me no joy. It tells me that when we battle with others we wish to win, and I would that I had had no such wish.'

He saw the look of surprise on her beautiful features. As she gave him the spurs she smiled.

'Do you go in peace or do you go in war?' she asked, and he was grateful for the question.

'Only in peace,' he said. 'This is the last of my jousting. From this time forward I will be as Facius my father was—a person of peace.'

He watched, astonished, as he saw her draw off the gloves from her slim hands, and then offer them to him.

'Be then a man of peace,' she said. 'Bring peace to all. Prove yourself worthy of this small gift and I shall be satisfied.'

He doubted that others had seen the second gift handed to him. The turmoil of his heart, occasioned by the jousting, somehow changed to peace, and to a tranquillity he had known only in quiet forests.

He bowed deeply. 'I am great encouraged,' he whispered. 'One day I may be able to repay this great kindness.'

The princess returned to the dais, and Balwone went to find his squire. He had determined to pack and leave as soon as possible.

As he moved away he was met by the great knight he had unhorsed. He looked into the unvisored face of this man and he saw a face dark with anger. He heard a hiss of wrath and then a strong voice saying, 'You will live to regret this day of jousting. It is not a little thing to unseat Kanavah of Miridon. Kanavah forgets not, neither does he forgive.'

Balwone said softly, 'In it all there was no trickery nor deceit. Kanavah of Miridon must not take his defeat as personal. I knew not with whom I was battling. Indeed, had I known, I would not have jousted differently. Now you must let me go on my way.'

'You shall go your way,' said the other grimly, 'but we shall meet again. Others of us shall pursue you to the death for we know your intentions towards us who are militant, and we loathe your talk of peace and amity. But for the rules you would have killed me this day.'

'Perhaps,' said Balwone in reply, 'you may well have done the same.'

He side-stepped his horse from the huge knight, and felt sad in his heart. It was as though some dragon had stirred there. He gripped the white gloves of the princess in his left hand, his mailed fist crushing the softness of them. Her words, at the last, had released him from the guilt of his heart and from any pride he had known in achieving victory. He nodded to the standing knight and passed on to find his squire and prepare to leave early on the morrow.

The knight stared after him and there was no mere stirring of a dragon in his being. He was himself as a dragon who could consume in its hate one who opposed it. He purposed to accomplish the death of the other, but when—he could not tell.

## CHAPTER TEN

## The Knight and the Cobbler

BALWONE was anxious to be away. The tournaments were completed, but there was to be a final day of banqueting. However, the knight had no heart for this. He was eager to be with Flamgrid, and as soon as possible. He begged an audience with Gothroyd the king and was granted it. Mabila, his queen, and the adorable Gothlic were present in the throne-room, and Balwone thought to withdraw when he was presented, but the king waved his gesture aside.

‘It would be good for us all to hold converse,’ he said, and gestured towards the royal women, including them.

Balwone could do little but agree, but he felt the warm flush of his blood rising to his neck and face, and his heart was flustered by the woman who had given him her chamois gauntlets. Never-theless he bowed again to the king and made his request.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, ‘you have been most gracious to me and my squire, and have hosted us well—far beyond what we had dreamed. We have greatly enjoyed our stay.’ He bowed towards the two ladies. ‘How pleasant our stay has proved! Now, however, we would be on our way for the pilgrimage to your famous cobbler. This wise man is my true mentor and I need his help for the venture I must soon undertake.’

The king nodded. ‘We understand that you believe you have a special vocation, and every man must fulfil that which is given to him. However, we also trust that when that is completed, we will see more of you. Your presence with us has been a source of pleasure to us.’

He stared down at the tessellated floor. ‘We would have greater links with Manignia, albeit part of our kingdom was ravaged those years ago when your late monarch invaded our realm.

What he did affected us somewhat, but not deeply. Moreover, your father, Facius, counselled him to do nought, but he went beyond the given counsel. We would have our kingdoms linked with indestructible ties.’

He paused and Balwone felt his heart constrict. He kept his eyes to the pavement, not daring to look at Gothlic. For her part she had a great warmth for the jousting noble, and had drawn strength from their last conversation.

The king continued. ‘We must allow you to take your leave,’ he said, ‘but we trust you will call on us if your journey takes you through this part of Zed. We trust our famous cobbler, and we wish you all well. Do return to us when your mission is accomplished.’

Balwone bowed low, first to the king, then the queen and then the princess.

‘Nothing could give me greater pleasure,’ he said, ‘though I know not what may come of the task on which I must go.’

The king knitted his brows and inclined his head towards the knight.

‘I hear that it is to do with universal love,’ he remarked. He paused. ‘Then it must also have to do with universal joy and universal peace. Those elements are sadly missing from our present world. May you have great success, and may you return to help us work them out and live them out.’

Balwone had not previously linked love, joy and peace together, and he was rather astounded at the monarch’s observation.

‘I am grateful to Your Majesty for the advice and encouragement you have given. I trust you will not be disappointed.’

Gothroyd stared at him for a few moments. ‘I will not be disappointed,’ he said, ‘for I expect nothing of your venture. Doubtless you will return the nobler man for the task you undertake, but I trust you will not become bitter at the lack of success.’

Balwone noted that Gothlic’s gaze was steadily upon him. He glanced momentarily in her direction and sensed she was sympathetic.

He said simply, ‘So much could hang upon my venture,’ he said. ‘I am not on my own. There are generations of wise men and prophets who have foretold what must come to pass.’

The king was silent for a moment before he said, 'May they all go with you—that breed of Flamgrid. You will need them all—and more.'

Balwone sensed the dismissal and made his final bows, first to King Gothroyd, then Queen Mabila and finally to Princess Gothic. If anything, he paused longer in his bow to her than to the others. Her eyes gleamed and she nodded gently.

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They left at midday, the packhorse heavily laden, and Balwone caparisoned, with the family pennant flying, though the knight wore no armour. He felt the strength of his squire, Roget and, when they had left behind the open domain of the king and had entered into the forest, they let their voices ring in ancient songs and in songs of their days, and felt the freedom of being released from the court. Roget had some fear that the knight Kanavah of Miridon might have preceded them to issue a further challenge to his late victor, but there was no sight or sound of him or of any other.

They knew they would not make the cobbler's glade by nightfall, so they camped at sunset, setting up a fire and haltering the horses so that they could graze. Just as darkness was gathering, a great animal wandered into their camp. They recognised it as a mastiff and wondered who was its owner. It made its way directly to Balwone and nuzzled its head in his hands as though it had always known him. Vaguely the knight remembered some fable concerning a great mastiff. It came to him that the name of the beast was 'Morna', and so he uttered this to the hound.

Immediately it responded, its front legs reaching up to his shoulders and its tongue licking his cheek. He bade it cease and it dropped back, but its eyes were on the knight, and when darkness drew in it settled down near the fire. It seemed to have no desire to return to its rightful owner. Indeed, it seemed to consider Balwone as its master—at least in this present camp.

The two men savoured their evening meal, having cooked it over the fire. They drank from the flasks filled at the royal kitchen and chatted a little before both of them felt sleepy.

It must have been midnight when Balwone was awakened by a deep-throated growl of the mastiff. Roget seemed deep in sleep, and so he did not see the fearsome dragon that had not—for some time—worried his master. Now it was present, and around it crowded vicious fire-breathing small editions of its self. Balwone noted with surprise and gladness that the mastiff could see the beasts. He began a loud barking and a long drawn-out snarling which awakened Roget, who peered with a hand over his eyes to see the object of the dog's attention. He could see nothing, which made him wonder at the barking and the tensed staring of his master-knight.

'What goes there?' he demanded, but neither dog nor master answered. He peered again but could see nothing. He wondered at the raised hackles of the large hound and the venom in its snarling bark.

'Take no heed!' Balwone shouted. 'It is the dragon that so often comes to torment, but it is a thing of my own mind, hence you cannot see it. It has no real substance. See, the horses here neither see nor smell it. If they did they would go into a high panic of fright!'

What he said was indeed true. The horses stood on the edge of the lighted camp and, even though they did pull at their tethers, they were calm, as though there had been no invasion from the fields of darkness. The strange thing to Balwone was that the mastiff could see what he believed was the abstract working of his own mind. The hound had risen and was growling softly in his throat as the hair rose on its massive neck.

The dragon sneered at his words. 'We powers do not find our origins in human minds!' he shouted. 'We come outside your minds. We are the true powers of the universe, and one day we will even overcome the Master-Maker of all things. His defeat is inevitable. He has become so fixed in his ways that our new ways will defeat him.'

'I have seen many of you,' said Balwone. 'None of you has the eyes of wisdom nor the stance of great beauty and encouragement. I think you devour what is good and destroy that which is good and right.'

‘Nothing from Man or his Most High is truly good,’ snarled the dragon, ‘for both are mindless. We have the new mind which brings what is true because it is new. The old never accomplished what is best and most perfect.’

‘You lie,’ said Balwone. ‘You cannot produce love. You can but subvert it. As for truth, it is the lie that you manufacture. Had it not been for you and your fellow creatures of evil, this world would never have come to the state that it is in.’

Even as he talked Balwone felt the rising barrier of the evil. He could not think clearly, and what he was saying was arising not from himself but from the wisdom he had learned. Snatches of it rose to the surface of his mind and were uttered. The sulphurous smell of the ancient creature and its minions seemed to paralyse the thought he would articulate.

The knight suddenly remembered the golden sword which often came to his side in such events but there was nought there. His other natural weapons he had laid aside before they had supped and slept, and so he was helpless to do anything. The hateful creature stared at him with scorn and contempt and raised its forelegs in obscene and dreadful gestures.

The mastiff, at this point, lay silent under the barrage of fire and smoke and the cannonading of words and vituperations. It was—so to speak—hugging the earth of the forest and yet it was edging forward, angling progress inch by inch, its great paws gripping the earth as it progressed towards the hateful creature that blasted clouds of flames and fumes. The knight dreaded the thought that it would be engulfed in the sulphurous breath of his antagonist but, just as he dreaded most the extinction of the great hound, it rushed and leapt at the throat of the dragon, catching it in an iron grip and sinking its teeth into the fire-breathing dragon. The minion crew of assistants cowered back and some of them retreated. The mastiff took little notice of them. His eyes were staring upwards at the giant dragon, who, for its part, had a transfixed look of terror. Its arms dragged at the daring dog but could not loose it off.

It turned and waddled rapidly towards its smaller dragon-fry, as though imploring them to do something, but they, for their part, took to their scaled legs and feet screeching in dread of the

fearsome hound which seemed to have leaped upon them from some nether region, some hell greater than the one they knew and tended. As the dragon turned to flee, the mastiff dropped away from it, avoiding the enormous tail which sought to batter it into death. It came bounding back to Balwone and stood before him, its eyes shining, its great red mouth open in vast panting, and saliva dripping from its sharp white fangs.

The royal knight put an arm around its neck and hugged it with joy and pride. Here was his first friend who could deal with dragons, and it was only Roget who was baffled. He had heard the mad baying of the dog and had seen it leap at something in the darkness, but that ‘something’ he had been unable to see.

‘What art thou about, and what is this thy pain and anger?’ he asked his master.

Balwone looked at him. ‘There are creatures of evil which you have not the sight to see, as yet,’ he told him. ‘That may yet come, but this animal Morna has the sight. So has cobbler Flamgrid whom we will see on the morrow. He and his ilk have such sight.’

Roget’s growl was not unlike that of the mastiff. ‘Had the creature not gone mad I would have thought thee to be crazed,’ he said, ‘but I am minded to find the same sight and to be at the evil creatures that torment first thy mind and now would bring death to thy body.’

Now thoroughly awakened, they stirred the embers of the fire, adding fresh branches fallen from trees, which sent up sparks that looked like crimson stars in the darkness of the forest. Morna lay panting, whilst the men roasted venison strips on the flames and shared them together as they drank from their flasks. Morna looked at the flesh thrown to him but he would not eat until bidden by the man whose life he had tried to save. Finally all three lay back, the heat of the fire warming their bodies, causing them to doze and not wake until the sun had broken through into their glade and the horses were making sounds that complained of hunger.

The two men went to the creek nearby and refreshed themselves, splashing the cold water on to their faces and rubbing it up their arms to the elbows. Balwone executed some body

exercises, imagining he could still smell the stink of the super-natural creatures which had visited him in the midst of the night. Roget sought for evidences that there had been a battle, but the earth and grass were undisturbed, and Roget shook his head as if in disbelief at his master's battle of the night. Only Morna the mastiff could give him grounds for any belief.

They broke their fast rapidly, repacked the extra horse with its burden and made sure their own mounts were fresh and trim for the journey. In a matter of hours they would meet Flamgrid, and somehow that meeting would decide their near future. Phlegmatic as was Roget, he felt a stirring in his body as they headed towards the dell of the homemade philosopher. The new squire was hoping this sage might exorcise dragons and demons from the mind of his master. He looked forward to a long and useful life with the man he had come to love. He also had the thought that this was a man born to be a king and that his coronation was not far off.

For himself Roget had no dreams or plans. He was still marvelling that his life had been preserved, that he had escaped the grip of Corsini, the cruel one, and that he had risen to the giddy height of being a squire. He never ceased to thank the unseen powers that be. Almost he was persuaded that a Most High did exist. How else could such things happen as had happened to him? He rode contentedly behind his master and observed the huge mastiff trotting at the heels of the knight's horse. Tough and terrible and tawny, the great creature seemed as contented as the two men.

Balwone had his own thoughts. He felt the intense joy of rejoining his old friend rise within his heart and body, and his mind began to teem with ideas. The flow of them brought a flood of tears to his eyes, but he stemmed them, damming them so that they could not be seen. Vistas of the world about him brought other memories—memories which haunted him night and day—of humanity in the bondage of its chains; of the misery of its suffering; of the oppression of those who would dominate it; and he cried out for its deliverance. His mind kept drawing out of his memory the great writings of the sages and prophets, but the solution to all this world and its human race needed still evaded him.

That was why he anticipated with ever-widening and ever-deepening yearning the meeting with Flamgrid. Surely his destiny would be more clearly revealed. Surely he would know the way of Massia and prove to be his faithful servant. Yet even as he thought, he found some dismay arising within him. Was it because he felt unworthy to be the disciple of the great Master, or was it possible that in some way he wanted to be very Massia himself? His thoughts frightened him more than the evil dragon itself.

The evil dragon! The thought struck him with great force, and he sat high on his steed. He remembered that each encounter with the dragon always left him with dreadful doubts and with ideas and impressions which made him feel ashamed of himself. Was it his true self which was shamed, and did he have another self which, whilst claiming to be one with the ancient sages, yet had its own wisdom, its own goal and a pride that might one day undo him? The last question he left suspended, for there before him was the path he remembered so well. He was near the refuge of Flamgrid's grove.

His inner ideas dissolved and were no more. The substance of his doubts became as nothing. High and honourable notions repossessed his mind. The stench of the dragon was gone, and he felt himself to be a new man as he hastened his mount—first trotting and then galloping—towards the glade of great wisdom.

He espied the cobbler, dressed in his forest-green garb, with his hands raised and welcoming, and felt he could not contain the joy that was flooding him.

'Ho! Flamgrid, my brother, my beloved master, my dear friend!' he cried as he rushed forward, as did Morna giving delighted barks and yelps.

Roget followed with more dignified pace, but he felt the wonder of the hour rise up within him, and his mind was heady and his spirit filled with anticipatory delight.

How great, then, was their meeting! How deep, then, was their joy! In all the wonder of it, peace flooded the three men and the great mastiff, albeit the eyes of Flamgrid were both joyful and sad in the one look and the one moment of their greetings.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## The Preparation

THE FIRST night was a time of high celebration. Flamgrid had spared nothing in preparation to welcome his guests. True, the food was not the rich menu known at *Zagonholme* or the palace of Gothroyd, and no servants awaited their pleasure, but the mead tasted like the nectar of angelic creatures, and the prepared joints—though few in number—were a credit to the culinary powers of the cobbler.

Before the night had drawn on, Roget saw that a special booth had been prepared for him, and beside it a stable for his two horses. The steed of Balwone was quartered a short distance away. Only when they were fully quartered did Flamgrid tell them the sorrowful story of the death of Sophius, the son of Pirinus, a leader of the Shemgridions, known also as the 'Feeble People'. This was the tribe from which Flamgrid had sprung when his parents had been killed and he had been orphaned to the kingdom of Zed to be fostered by Zemgrid and Femgrid. These two—though of different families of the Shemgridions—had themselves long before been orphaned but had established themselves by help and hard work within the forest of Zed. So they had trained Flamgrid as if their own child, and had encouraged him when—as if by nature—he had sought out wisdom as the destiny of his life.

One day Sophius had come, and with him Morna, the great hound of the Shemgridions. He had told Flamgrid of Massia that royal person who would bring true love and peace to the world and, for this reason, Sophius himself had desired to find out the sage Flamgrid and give instructions for the one who was to foster love in this world until it reached universal proportions and set the races of Man free from the tyranny which comes with human

selfishness, greed and pride. He had prophesied on his first and only visit that Morna, the mastiff, would one day appear to Flamgrid and this would be a sign that the birth of universal love was very close. Indeed, Morna would in some way aid in the fulfilment of this love.

Thus Flamgrid had been in mourning for the old friend who must now have gone beyond this life into that place where the true immortals live. Whilst Morna's coming had brought joy, it had also brought the sorrow that comes to all when they know beloved faces will be seen no more—not, anyway, in this vale of living.

The night's celebrations were therefore tinged with the thought of Sophius's death, but they were also filled with joy that the great journey was soon to begin for Balwone and, it would seem, for Roget and Morna. It was not to be, however, before Balwone of Manignia was fully fledged for his great expedition. All of this they would discuss on the morrow, but meanwhile, on this pleasant evening, they would celebrate as one does in a feast of love.

After the feast the cobbler did not draw out his manuscripts of wisdom, but he sang songs the knight had not hitherto heard. They were long songs, songs which were sagas of the human race, songs about covenants, about agreements mankind had made with the Most High, and of the celestial creatures who had helped when dark powers had come upon the various nations in order to destroy them.

The singing was sweet, often plaintive, almost to being a dirge, but then the notes would quicken and Flamgrid's voice would take on an unearthly tone—deep and majestic—and he would praise and adore the Most High. In this way he taught what could not otherwise have been taught. The two men—and perhaps even the hound—entered by feeling and faith into a world they had scarcely known.

It was a world in which love, peace and joy were known vibrantly. Yet also there were the sounds of dark wings beating about them, and great creatures which Balwone would have called 'mythical' flapped and gave cries which were no less than threats, but which were drained of the power to destroy. Oft times it seemed the two and the dog were passing through forests

darker than man had known, and that the creatures of those jungles of trees came out to stare, and even—if possible—to destroy the travellers.

Once Morna was caught up in the dirge-like singing and gave vent to a mournful cry which sounded like the distress of creatures dying or caught in intolerable pain. Then the hound ceased his utterance and lay as though in interminable peace, his head between his outstretched front paws and his eyes opened in soulful tranquillity.

So the night flowed on until great weariness came to the guests, and even to their host, and with a brief salutation each guest retired to his booth. Only Flamgrid stayed beside the fire, his head sunk between his knees, his eyes seeming to search among the picture of the burning logs for signs and portents of the coming weeks. Flamgrid was no mystic and he saw no portents, but his mind was alert and sensitive. Not without its effects had been the saga-songs of the race he loved and the humanity he fain would help. With tenderness he thought upon Balwone, but as the night drew towards the dawn a faint uneasiness came to him about his warrior-brother, and he felt the desperate loneliness a human spirit feels when it is left to itself and none comes to comfort. All his hopes were in the son of Facius and Merphein, and he longed that no evil power should taint the good spirit of his disciple or raise up the pride that destroys all who dally with it.

After a time the sage slept, and his sleep was undisturbed by dreams of anger or accusation. He slept to awake refreshed and to stir his guests into the life of the day.

After they had broken their fast with Flamgrid's famous spiced bread, and they had drunk the sweet mead he manufactured from forest honey, they sat at his cobbler's bench and listened to the cobbler read from the wisdom literature he had gathered. Some of the material was not new, but Balwone's pulses quickened for it seemed he had not hitherto understood these familiar readings. A great light seemed to break into him until he had to cry out to his master to desist, as indeed the cobbler did, but his eyes shone as he saw the tears of joy and the countenance of wonderment in his old pupil.

'It is as though all things are coming together,' said the knight. 'I see in a new way that love is man's only hope. Men must be taught to see the value and the power of love. Then they will love, and so anger, hatred, rivalry and selfishness will disappear from the earth. Cruelty and violence will die a death and will rise no more.'

Roget often protested, but his objections were feeble and he felt his inability to make them stand before the other two. Even so, he persisted.

'This love of which men speak,' he said. 'Show me where it has ever been. Do not spouses sometimes destroy each other—if not by weapons, yet by words and actions? Do not children destroy their parents in their bid for money and fame and security?'

He turned to Balwone. 'Didst thou not oppose those who sported with you in the tournament, and did not Kanavah of Miridon hate thee for thy victory? Wert thou not delighted to have won, and wilt thou not destroy those who oppose thee in thy venture to establish this great love for all?'

Flamgrid watched Balwone closely as these questions were asked, and he saw something of unease in his favourite pupil. Even so, he felt it right to answer the new squire.

'All things love,' he said. 'You can see that, even with the little offspring of cats and dogs and such animals. They learn to grow with their struggles amongst themselves, and when they mature they have a character—each of its own. Yet were there not love many would be destroyed when young, and more when mature.'

'When human beings live together they make the demand of love from each other. They are disappointed when love does not display itself, but even this shows that love is an expected thing within the human race. All know of love. It simply requires one to give it to another and the other to respond. One day all will do this, but first the golden egg must break, and love come fully to the world—in power.'

It was here that Balwone interjected. 'This golden egg of love,' he said, 'I have heard you speak of it, and sometimes the ancients have written of it. Now we must know the whole story.'

Tell it to us, Flamgrid, that Roget may know the hope that there is for the world, and I may more fully understand my destiny.'

'It has been written by the ancients,' said the cobbler, 'that somewhere there is a far mountain, higher than any man has climbed . . .'

Balwone interrupted him. 'I have seen that mountain,' he said excitedly. 'It is beyond a great forest which is more like a jungle than the ordered woods that we know. A man must make his way through this jungle in order to reach the mountain, and then he must climb it.'

'Only one shall ever climb it,' said Flamgrid, and he was breathing hard.

For a moment Balwone's mind stopped. He felt himself suspended in time. Around him were the usual forest sounds: the singing of crickets; the songs of known birds; the hum of bees in the flower-encrusted trees; and the rustling of small animals in the thick ferns and undergrowth. It was as though beauty vibrated in every plant, tree and creature. The faces before him were beloved, and great affection welled in him for Morna, the mighty mastiff. Then he knew that he had hesitated to accept Flamgrid's statement, 'Only one shall ever climb it.'

He said quietly, 'Yes, only one shall ever climb it.' He felt his destiny lay in being that one.

Flamgrid said, 'In that forest there are mighty giants, such as have not been seen by the eyes of human beings. They are cruel and they are strong, and will easily devour a man if he be not careful.'

'Wouldst thou let our master Balwone traverse that great forest?' asked Roget. 'If so, then I would go with him, and I would also ascend the mountain, helping this man in the great climbing.'

The eyes of the hound were pitifully upon the three men, as though he, too, would travel where Balwone would go.

There was a sadness in the cobbler's voice. 'The Writings say that only one shall climb that mountain and nurture the golden egg until irresistible love break forth from it, and the world be at peace.'

'In my visions,' said Balwone, 'I have seen that high peak and on it a great egg of gold, but one is seated there who has

climbed the mountain. Since it is my destiny to climb and to nurture that egg, how then shall one only climb when always I see two?'

'It is a riddle,' the cobbler said, 'a riddle no sage has ever been able to solve. It is said that only one man may ever pass through the jungle of the cruel giants, and that he must defeat these enemies of himself with the very weapon that is given to him for love and not destruction.'

Roget growled, and the mastiff whimpered, as though in sympathy. 'I must be with my master to the end,' said the squire doggedly. 'It is my life and it is my duty—love or no love, golden egg or no golden egg. Where he goes I must go.'

Flamgrid nodded. 'In the end—the far away end—you shall be with him, but you may only go as far as the jungle. At its edge you must stay and wait for your master, for he will return. Then he will need you, as also he will need Morna. You three must be the true servants of Massia, for it is he who will come after the jungle and mountain are conquered and the golden egg breaks forth. This much I know from the wise men of old. More than this I have not discovered, and I am certain I never will.'

At that point Flamgrid broke the conversation. As a practised mentor he would not let his listeners hear more than they could absorb and upon which they could usefully ruminat.

'You must come with me,' he said, 'for I have somewhat to show you. Such you have not seen before and it will greatly hearten you.'

Deeply curious, the two men and the great hound followed him. He took them into the depths of the forest, even to a place which Balwone had never penetrated. He wondered what it would be—what it could be—that the master would show them. He fancied he heard the sound of a gentle whinny, but he knew no horse could be seen deep in this thick wood. However, when they broke into a glade which was fenced by stout trees standing almost trunk to trunk, he knew his hearing had been true.

There before them was a pure white stallion, so perfectly moulded, so strong in limb and body, and so beautiful, that the knight felt he wanted to weep. The head of the creature was lifted up in a stance men would have called proud but which Balwone

had to say was one of humility. The eyes that gleamed were of the same blue as that of the Shemgridions, the mystical Feeble People, and the snickering of the animal had a soft delight in it, as though its affection would be irresistible.

The three men and the hound stood and gazed at it, delight filling all their hearts. For its part the animal lifted its head, neighed mightily and then nodded as though to communicate its friendship for them.

Roget could scarcely restrain himself. He felt himself urged forward to feel and to caress the beautiful creature. The great mastiff had eyes as gentle as those that looked at him, and he too felt drawn. Balwone was rooted in the place where he stood. He was too awed to follow the others. Flamgrid took one arm and urged him forward, and the knight walked as in a vision. His eyes were moist with wonder.

'Never!' Flamgrid breathed. 'Never have I seen such beauty and such power. This is perfection.'

'It is indeed perfection,' thought the knight, and his heart played havoc with him. It was as though the gentleness of Merphein and Merom and Gothic had come together in this glorious creature, and yet the wisdom of the sages was also present.

He touched the nose of the stallion and it muzzled into his hand. For a moment it was still, and then it looked into the eyes of its future master and whinnied with pleasure.

'You must mount it,' said Flamgrid, but Balwone seemed not to hear him. It was as though wonder had taken him beyond human thought. His mind was on mythical creatures, but he knew this to be real and not mythical; yet it was as the myths, and no less than them.

'I need a saddle, a bridle and a crupper,' he said. 'I need to be seated with honour and dignity befitting this beautiful creature.'

'Mount,' said Flamgrid with deep authority, and Balwone was unable to disobey him.

He mounted in a trice, and there was no anger in the mount. It stood still, but not with the quietness which is deceptive and portends a sudden rejection of its rider. The two men looked at the knight who seemed moulded into the stallion, which—for its part—seemed moulded into the man.

'Tomorrow,' said Flamgrid, 'you must go, but now you must dismount. We must leave this wonderful creature here, that others may not find him, for men would give their lives for such a steed. No animal of its kind has ever been so fleet.'

'None so beautiful,' Balwone muttered as he dismounted. 'He will, of course, take me to the great mountain.'

'He will take you to the jungle, and then through that part which man and beast can pass together. After that you must leave him. When you leave him, you must travel on alone with only the golden sword at your side.'

Flamgrid saw the distress in Roget's eyes, and he said gently, 'You will go to the jungle. There you must await your master's return.'

They left the stallion in the clearing and he snickered at the parting. Balwone was thinking about the world in which he lived, and it was as though all the beauty he had ever seen now came together in a rich unity, and his mind was assured that all things were good—all things of what men called 'nature'. The evil of men and dark powers he acknowledged, but he was thinking that these were outclassed by the vibrant beauty of the creation. He knew his dreams that night would be filled with the beauty of the steed, and he would scarce be able to wait for the dawn and for his journey so soon to be undertaken.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## The Commencement of the Great Venture

**T**HAT NIGHT Balwone did not dream of the beautiful stallion. Instead the dragon came to him, and this time with such fury that he immediately felt at his side to see whether the golden sword had come. Indeed it had come, and he sensed he would need it.

Roget saw the dragon, as did Flamgrid and the tawny mastiff. They saw it come into their wold, and it was rearing in high anger and blazing wrath. This time its minions were grown almost as large as it, and they advanced as an army determined to destroy all in their path. Roget was clearly shocked by the evil creature, and terror showed in his eyes. Flamgrid stood calmly, his arms folded, and his eyes staring steadily at the dragon and his hordes. As for the mastiff, its back was arched, its body stiff and its hackles raised. Guttural growls were issuing from it, and it was prepared to rush forward, but Balwone restrained it with steady words.

Then Flamgrid gave a quiet laugh as he talked to the huge scaly creature. 'You would come,' he said, 'before the son of Facius and Merphein goes on his way to destroy your empire. This is what we might have expected.'

He paused. 'I would have thought you would do something more subtle, such as send some daemon power into the mind of my friend, accusing him of being unworthy of such a noble task and too weak to execute it. But doubtless you have sought to weaken all the people of the Most High—scattered as they are among the nations and kingdoms in this world. You will be telling them such a thing can never come to pass. So you would seek to dispirit them.'

Heightened fumes of anger rose from the distended nostrils of the great beast, and shrill cries of imitation were emitted by the throng of cult creatures. Flamgrid's scorn did not lessen.

He said slowly, 'You are not real. You are not whole. One day you will be shown as a huge deceit and as a loathsome lie. Your Master bids you do such and such, and you are bound to do it, but in your heart, as in his, there is fear, there is insecurity, there is a dread without which you can never live. Hence you must do as he says. You fear him and you fear the Most High, but hatred overcomes your fear for the moment, and so you come towering over us today, hoping quickly to destroy us and set your Master's kingdom at rest.'

Balwone listened with wonder. Roget lost the terror that was in his eyes, and the hound stretched itself along the ground, keeping its eye on the monster and his lesser monsters. When the huge creature snarled and sent out ever-increasing billows of smoke and flame, Balwone noted it did not come one yard closer.

He drew his sword to make battle with it, but Flamgrid put out a restraining hand.

'Do not battle with it. Each time you battle and win, it multiplies itself with its offspring. This has ever been the way of evil. It thinks in terms of power, of numbers.'

He laughed. 'We, the Feeble People, the Shemgridions who were there at the beginning and perceived the treacherous deceit of the father of this creature and his tribe, put our trust in the Most High and feared nothing of others. Watch, Balwone, Roget and Morna: I will advance and this creature will not dare touch me. He will try, but he will not succeed.'

He turned to Balwone. 'Keep your sword for other ventures, for you will need it against the giants, those enemies who would pierce within your soul and destroy you by means of your will. This hulking brute has no heart for the battle of trust. He fears us of the Feeble People, for he cannot understand our strength since it is other than what he judges strength to be. He will never understand.'

He advanced, hands outstretched, towards the scaled monster, and it worked itself into a great rage and billowed out the heat of its anger, roaring at high pitch and calling for the co-operation of

its lesser creatures. They, too, imitated their master, and the hissing, fuming and screaming that grew with every step forward of the cobbler-sage was dreadful both to hear and behold. Morna the mastiff crept on its belly behind the cobbler, ready for action. Balwone's hand was upon his sword, and Roget's upon his long knife, partly withdrawn from its sheath, but Flamgrid advanced without a weapon other than his speech.

Balwone watched the eyes of the dragon. Their yellow glow changed to green and then to black, and whilst it did not shift ground it drew back at the approach of the Shemgridion who had no weapon in his hand or at his side. The wold was lit up with ever-changing colours, and it was a wonder the forest giants of oak did not catch alight or move at the fuming of the massed creatures.

The fumes died, the flames sputtered to nothing and the clouds of smoke dissipated as the cobbler drew near. The dragon sought to bring a last burst of fire upon the advancing man, but some-thing within it collapsed, and it shrank back. Then it drew back. With like fear the other creatures retreated, step by step, step by step, until they were forced into the forest, and in a matter of moments had left the man standing on his own, hands uplifted, with a song that was issuing from his mouth, a song that these invaders obviously dreaded and which had hastened their retreat.

Wonderingly, the others caught up with the master of wisdom. Morna stood at his full height and shook himself. Balwone released his hand from his sword, and Roget thrust his weapon back into its scabbard. Flamgrid still watched until the creatures were out of sight, his song still flowing in power and joy.

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Later, when they were supping, Balwone earnestly asked the secret of the beast's defeat.

'It is joy and peace,' Flamgrid said quietly. 'If a human creature does not have love he—or she—is bereft of joy and peace. If there is hate in the heart then the dragon has some place, some point of accusation, some hold, and this he will never let go. The Master behind him sees to it that these minions travel the world,

keeping humankind in dread and fear of them. Their hearts sink when the accusations penetrate and so they are unseated and hence unsettled. They believe, then, in the power of the fumes and the flames, the fire and the destruction. They have no true heart for living, and certainly not for loving.'

Flamgrid gazed earnestly at Balwone. 'Where love is not, then there is no peace and joy. All three are one together. The dragon dreads such. If he could have brought me into fear, and if I had retreated, then he would have rushed upon me and de-destroyed me.'

He smiled gently. 'Many a night he has come but not in that foolish form. He has known me better than to attempt that. No: his forms are many, and much more subtle. Doubtless, Balwone, he has come to you in the form of woman, or even of threatening persons such as Kanavah of Miridon.'

Balwone had told him of the huge knight, and so he was not surprised, but now he was seeing his enemy in a new light. Surely he was an emissary of the enemy.

Flamgrid went on. 'Woman is not any more than is a man, nor is she the agent of the enemy, as such, but he would so present her to us as the enemy, for he would divide what is the most powerful of all unions—that of man and woman.'

He looked again at Balwone. 'Ultimately it is not the union of man and woman that the enemy fears. It is a common thing—this union—but bodily union is nothing when it is only that. The enemy, too, can use it. It is *communion* he dreads most of all. Such a thing he cannot overcome. Most of all he dreads the union of mankind with the Most High, especially when that becomes communion. Then it is he cannot separate the Creator from his creatures.'

Balwone felt himself trembling. 'Does a man have to have communion before he can be proof against the enemy?' he asked. 'I know of none with whom I have true communion, except perhaps you and Roget. I have never had union with a woman, let alone communion.'

'It is communion with the Most High that matters. When one has that with him, then one has the communion that makes him proof against all forms of evil.'

These words did not quieten the trembling of the knight of Zagon, but rather caused it to increase. 'What is this communion?' he asked in a whisper.

'All the sages and the prophets had it,' said the cobbler. 'You must also have had this or you would not be on this great venture. Perhaps you think it is something you must feel. No: it is simply a relationship. Such a relationship gives you sights of the Most High and his intentions for this creation.'

Balwone was partly pacified, but he was still troubled in the depths of his spirit. His trembling continued, although it had somewhat abated. The late supper ended and the three men made preparations for sleeping. The knight wondered whether the scaly beast would reappear, but he slept soundly, and when he awoke he was ready for the journey ahead.

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Flamgrid was not anxious to let them depart immediately. He had necessary last-moment wisdom to teach to Balwone, instructions to give to Roget and some sharing of affection with Morna who was to accompany the two travellers.

To Roget he said, 'Go with your master to the far-away forest which men call Allein, but which few have entered and from which none has returned. You must only enter it at the beginning for his horse will take him as far as he is able. Before this, there will come a time when you must leave him. Wait for him if you will, but not within the forest. Morna will go as far as it wills with Balwone the Great until it knows its task is completed and then it must return. Wait also for it. As for the white stallion—Ballia—it will also know what to do. Perhaps it will wait for its master at the foot of the mountain, but it will not be allowed to ascend that holy hill.

'Above all things be patient and do not lose heart at what you might see happen, even the dejection and despair of him whom you regard as strong and noble. Let not your feelings betray you in your loyalty. You have as much been chosen as has been the knight of Zagon, for we are all chosen. It is just that we hold ideals for one another that outstrip our true humanity.'

Roget replied, 'I trust thee, master of cobbling and of wis-dom, for our day. I shall obey thy instructions when the time comes. For me they are now a mystery, but doubtless they will be clear at the moment of their fulfilment.'

He bowed to the wise cobbler of Zed. 'I see weaknesses in my master and wonder whether he can fulfil the destiny given to him. If he does not, then I will love him no less, and the more I will care for him if he needs my loyalty and aid. I desire that we will be successful and return to thee with good news and that we may learn of thee more wisdom for the new days which we trust will have come.'

With that the new squire bowed again, nodded to Flamgrid, then went to prepare things for the departure.

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Morna was a hound that was truly of this world. It had no supernatural elements. It had feelings and it had certain standards that seem to belong to loyal canines. Somehow it had known it must seek out Flamgrid, and the master Balwone, and in this its role it was content. When the cobbler rubbed its coat, caressed it and spoke into its ears, it seemed to gain some special knowledge and intelligence. Its eyes brightened and it licked the hand of the cobbler. Then it lay down, awaiting the departure of the two men and their horses.

\* \* \*

To Balwone, Flamgrid spoke of the heart of the matter.

'You will be the servant of Massia, though you have seen him not. Perhaps you may find him in you or in the man who nurtures the egg—the man whom you may seek to replace. Listen to what the spirit in you tells you, and do only that.

'Keep in mind all the time the quality of humility. Vaunt not yourself as one above the fellows of our own race. It is not that we are all equal, but it is that we are all one, and as one we do not boast ourselves against others. Remember that.

‘Remember that Ballia, your white stallion, has understanding that comes from equine intuition. Ask me not how this is, but remember that it is so. When you go through the forest it will know more than you how to traverse distance and how to find its way in a pathless jungle. When it refuses to go further, then dismount and care not for it. You may ride it with bridle and saddle to the edge of the great forest, but after that you must ride it bareback so that it will go according to the intuition of its own kind.

‘Finally the wisdom of the Most High is this, that for every divinely imposed law, and for every divinely given gift, the tribe of mankind will make its own substitution. Its substitute will appear to be the real thing as given to Man, but in truth it will often be but an imitation, the result of human devising and brilliance. Above all, do not deceive yourself. There is no man who is a human who lives to himself, and in doing so lives properly. Beware of ambition. It is worse than any dragon you may ever meet. As I said, humility is the key to true power and achievement.

‘So may you go in genuine love, peace and joy. For these there can be no substitute, though there may be many which closely resemble them.’

When he had said these things Flamgrid then bowed to the knight of Zagon. ‘There is a last thing I must say to you, as you leave. It is this: “Hail to you, Balwone the Great, messenger of Massia. Your hour has come and multitudes salute you, not only from the present, but from the past, and so the future. Be true, then, to the holy charge.” ’

\* \* \*

Having said these things, Flamgrid embraced Balwone. His friend was loath to break the embrace or leave the cobbler. His eyes were wet with tears as also was the face of Flamgrid. The teaching of many years had wedded his spirit to that of the younger man, and his fears for Balwone increased that love in a manifold way.

Balwone was troubled by the parting salutation of his friend. Somewhere—perhaps in his dreams—he had heard such a salutation, ‘Balwone the Great!’ He did not balk at the title, knowing it was conferred and not earned by him, but it made him alive to the responsibility which was his. In his spirit he shivered, and the unease that had come to him in these later years returned mani-foldly. For the sake of Flamgrid and Roget he shook off his un-ease and fears and showed a smiling face. His mind told him it was good that he be not over-confident, but his spirit lay under the burden of the cobbler’s salute and the reminder that not only he—Flamgrid—was acclaiming and honouring him as such, but the silent audience of the sages and prophets down through all ages.

Roget he grasped warmly but shortly, then nodded in salute, and toggled the ears of the great mastiff before he would let him go. Since Balwone now had the white stallion, he had given his gelding to Roget. Their packhorse they had taken, but left the squire’s mare in its booth. Squire Roget held the pennant of the noble from Manignia, they moved forwards, their horses capari-soned, their armour clothing them, and both men filled with sober joy.

It was only Flamgrid who watched with some trepidation in his heart. Part of his mind was assured that this was the great trek for the liberation of the human race, whilst the other part of it was still held captive by the history of the same race. It was only the thought of the Most High and the prophecies of the past which were wedded to the wisdom that he knew, that finally convinced him the great transformation would come.

‘Even so,’ he sighed to himself, ‘can one man undertake so much and emerge having accomplished his allotted task?’

As he stared at the departing party, the rumps of their horses moving rhythmically in the distance, he knew he must not lack faith. He remembered the training of Facius and Merphein, and his heart yearned to see them at this moment. How comforting to know their trust in their son! Also he remembered the prophecy of Sophius the son of Pirinus, and the coming of the great mastiff, Morna.

Not until they were gone from his sight did he cease gazing after them.

He sat for hours in the sunlit grove, his body still and his mind moving in intercession for the travellers and their canine warrior. In those hours he recalled to mind the many prophecies and the high wisdom of the ancient sages.

As the evening rays of the sun slanted low across his glade, and the pure blue of the sky began to darken to a violet beauty, he pondered the glory of the Most High, the wonder of his creation, and the tasks he had given to mankind. He remembered with a sigh that Balwone had been equipped with his own sword and knife, and that the packhorse had carried other weapons for battle.

He was dismayed that he had not fully explained to the knight that these were of no use against the enemy. The man's love would forbid him to fight and destroy any human enemy—other-wise his mission of love would be nullified, in which case joy and peace would be lost.

He wondered why he had not informed Balwone that the true sword would come to his side at the right moment, and that that sword was not a human weapon of battle. It was the weapon which was wisdom, the words of the Most High given to men, but shaped as such on the anvil of great holiness, righteousness and truth. It was—forsooth—the weapon of love. Its golden metal was that of royalty, and its flashing glory the reflection of its origin—the splendour of the Most High.

He tried, by means of his mind and will, to convey this to Balwone who was by now far out of sight.

Only when the sky's purple was turning to black, and the first pinpoints of the golden stars were pricking the canopy of the heavens, did he move his limbs, stiff from his meditative immobility.

He gave life to the fire, and sent its own golden stars into the night, the flames flickering brightly and the sparks flying up-wards from the dry leaves and timber with which it was fed.

After a time the moon appeared as a great golden ball, but silvered as its size diminished, and it could give steady light to travellers and cobbler alike.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Pilgrimage to the Great Forest

THE TWO men had no maps. They sensed they were being guided, and since Morna ran ahead of them, they took it that the hound knew where they were going. They both took in the beauty of the woods—the sounds and movements they had come to know as typical of all forests. It was the season of the late summer and the first streaks of autumn could be seen in some of the deciduous trees. As yet the golds and crimsons were but faint. For the most part the foliage was of a vivid green. The birds had finished their hatchings and young off-spring were maturing into adulthood. They would need to be alert, wary of predators both in the trees and on ground; wary also of the animals which lived on the ground and rustled in the undergrowth as they sought to prey on the birds and smaller animals.

At the streams and rivers they saw the animals that lived in the water, and which swam silently, sending out wavelets but no other warnings to the fish and water creatures they sought to catch and devour. Sometimes deer crossed the paths of the travellers, but they were well supplied with food and drink from both the royal household and the stocks of the forest-wise cobbler. Morna, it seemed, was not in the mood for catching prey, but was quietly pressing on to fulfil the mandate it had received from the source which kept supplying its intuitive leading. It was as though Ballia was affirming the senses of the mastiff for it had shown its own intuition regarding the way they were going. Balwone for his part could only sense the wonder of being astride such an animal. He felt at one with it, and observed its oneness, also, with the hound which led the party.

Finally it was the same purple darkness which bade them halt for the night as Morna led them into a grassy grove with its walls of forest trunks, and its ceiling, not of branches, but the sky that was being lightened by the moon.

Roget bid his master relax whilst he gathered timber for a fire, lit the soft kindling with flint and metal and soon had food warmed in the glow of the growing coals. Both men used their daggers to slice meat from a bone which was then thrown to Morna. The tethered horses cropped the tall grasses, clearing the ground as they went. Ballia, the stallion, was an animal sensitive to new sounds, and with Morna and this steed, the men knew they had guards enough around them. Both men could not but admire the smooth lines of the white horse, and Balwone was gratified by the gift Flamgrid had brought to him.

There was little talk that night. Balwone now knew not to dread the coming of the dragon, since dread could bring it on to the scene, and in his ignoring of the evil, the knight found peace and rest. He and his companion stretched out in the warmth of the fire—Roget having laid heavy timber to see them through many hours—and both slept without dreams. Only Morna remained awake and alert. Ballia was no longer tensed and alert, and so dozed as he stood. There were night cries of birds and animals, but these could not disturb the dreamless sleep of the knight and his squire.

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It took them many days to reach the edge of the forest, and in all those days nothing untoward happened. Roget wondered at this easy passage: indeed, he was suspicious, but the contentment in both Morna and Ballia told him all was well.

It was well. Balwone was gathering strength. It was as though they had retreated for a period from the demands of the world about them and were being given time in which to think, ruminate and ponder that which lay ahead, as also all that lay behind them. They were also being given opportunity to share and discuss the thoughts of their minds.

Roget had been disturbed by Flamgrid's commands, but Balwone assured him that it would be best to obey them. 'In these things his wisdom is beyond ours,' he said.

'What causes me disquiet,' said Roget, 'is that all that is to happen seems to be known beforehand. We move only as though we had no wills, as if fate awaited us.'

The knight pondered that statement. Then he said, 'It is not fate. Fate is as luck—good luck and bad luck. The decision is not in the hands of evil powers who would draw us on to our fate. It is in the hands of the Most High who plans what is best for our humanity.'

'It is the plans which trouble me,' said the squire. 'Life is best when we are free to make our own decisions.'

'You savour of Corsini and his oppression,' said Balwone with a smile. 'Now it is not Corsini whose will is corrupt, but the Most High, and they are not to be confused. One seeks his own, and the other seeks our benefit.'

Roget grunted his assent. 'I still wonder where our freedom is,' he said.

Balwone's smile broadened. His free hand went out, embracing the world about them. 'See!' he said. 'We go where we will. Should we choose to go no farther, or to take another path, then we may do so.'

A wry grin was on Roget's face. 'Look!' he said, pointing to Morna and indicating Ballia. 'We go where they lead us. Try to swerve them from this path and see what will happen.'

'The worst,' said Balwone. 'It is just that the Most High is a goodly guide. He uses many means to lead us where we must go. Look, Roget, where he has led you over these months.'

Roget nodded his assent along with an honest grin. 'Thou art right, master,' he said. 'Better this way than the old.' He kept smiling.

\* \* \*

On the fourteenth day the great jungle-forest came in sight. Its trees and their foliage could be seen to be different, even at the

distance they were from it. Far, far away, in a distance that almost obscured the object of the mountain, they faintly glimpsed a high peak. It seemed to be beyond the jungle. From a hill they looked over a vast area of the jungle. It was like a massed army, impenetrable and, to their sight, formidable.

They were about to make camp in the late afternoon when they saw a party approaching. The sight even of strangers was welcome, and they halted their unloading to greet the men on horseback. Among them were knights and squires. To Balwone's astonishment a huge man separated himself from the halted throng and came towards the knight of Zagon.

'Tis the hour that is fixed,' said the man. 'You are to meet your doom. No one passes through Miridon without permission. They who trespass must be imprisoned.'

'Forsooth,' said Balwone, 'it is the knight Kanavah.'

'The same,' said the other man, unsmiling. 'I spoke of this day that would come, and now it is here. You asked no permission to pass through, and now you must forfeit who you are and what you have.'

Balwone shook his head in unbelief. 'I have not yet heard it thus,' he said. 'All kingdoms give passage to those not at war with them. Zed received you with honour and gave you dignity. We were one in the same tournament, and now you would have my life!' His voice rose with his astonishment.

'It is no kingdom with which I am at war,' said the man. 'I have no quarrel with Zagon of Manignia. It is with one of the knights of Zagon that I have my quarrel. He is the one who would destroy our system and introduce his strange ideas and human heresy. It is you, Balwone, with whom I shall now battle.'

It was then the knight of Zagon remembered the words of Flamgrid, that the knight Kanavah was an emissary of evil—one linked with the dragon and his ilk, a real son of the beast. He knew that if this were the case then his sword would probably be of little help against the murderous knight, for he knew murder and not justice was the cause of this confrontation.

He looked up at the great giant of a man. 'We knew not that we were within Miridon's bounds. Since you are a knight, and

against us, then be pleased to lead us to your monarch, and we will make peace with him and beg his pardon for our unwitting trespass.'

'Fine words,' sneered the other knight. 'However, you are in my own domain and I shall deal as I wish with you. We could, of course, have warned you, and you could have turned back, but I desired that honest battle which will deal with you.'

'I have forsworn all such fighting and battle,' said Balwone. 'This promise I made to Gothlic, daughter of Gothroyd of Zed. To break that pledge would be a matter of dishonour.'

The knight roared with laughter and turned to his fellow knights. 'How easily does a man become a coward!' he cried. 'Plighting troth is easy for a man who uses deceit in his tournaments. Now he would withdraw his victory through lack of courage.'

Balwone felt his spirit to be calm in the face of such calumnies. 'It is not cowardice,' he claimed, 'but the very truth itself. I have no fear of you. 'Tis only that I have a calling which I must fulfil that I refuse to do battle with you.'

The knight was now thoroughly aroused and into a rage which Balwone knew could not be recalled. He saw that a struggle was inevitable, and he felt helpless. For a moment he made a faint move towards his sword—not to do battle but to be assured it was there—and he saw to his astonishment that his own sword was absent, and in its place the golden sword that had come when he was confronted by the dragon.

He looked at Kanavah. 'Then I will fight,' he said, 'but I lay my conditions for the battle. We will remove our armour and fight only in the garments we wear beneath them. Also we will fight only with swords and not spears or lances. We will use no clubs or short knives. It must be to the death with swords and swords only.'

The other knight seemed astounded, but then recovered himself and began his rough and hearty laughing again.

'Does the knight-chicken believe he can do this on horseback or on foot? I pledge either if that will help you in your last hour.'

Balwone made no reply. He was already divesting himself of his heavy armour by the aid of his squire.

The other knights were silent. Balwone sensed they did not altogether like what their leader had been saying, and he felt they were men of chivalry and honour—unlike the boisterous accuser of the quieter knight.

‘You will judge this day,’ said Kanavah, ‘who is the true one and who is the false. This cockerel shall soon be cut to pieces—a fit object for the wild pigs of yonder jungle.’

In a surprising action Balwone was divesting his horse, Ballia, of its bridle and saddle. His own spurs had gone with the armour he had abandoned, and in a few moments he had strapped his sword belt afresh, and its slender golden sheath hung at his side. He leapt onto the great stallion.

Kanavah had an eye to horseflesh and he could not but admire the size and shape of the supple steed. ‘That stallion will be mine in a trice,’ he said. ‘Only fools ride bareback, and that sword looks like the toy of an ungrown lad.’ He laughed again, and it was hideous with hatred as it resounded across the glade of the forest.

It may have been that the knight of Miridon was conscious of the silence of his fellow knights and that he sensed their lack of approval.

‘It will be over in moments,’ he said. ‘Do not be impatient. Raise swords, knight, and at the drop of them we will charge one another.’

In a flash his sword was raised, so that Balwone had barely lifted his from his sheath. The huge knight scarcely waited for Balwone’s sword to drop when he was upon him. A sigh of disapproval came from the knights for they saw no chivalry in this. Such conflicts were to be fought according to set rules, and the large knight had disregarded them.

Roget, for his part, had his hand on his long knife. He also had a sword, but had no expertise with it. If the knight of Miridon was going to kill his master, then he would risk his life to kill the huge man. He knew the attempt was aimed at stopping Balwone from reaching the jungle and then the mountain.

If it had been left to the skill of Balwone he would not have survived the surprise attack upon him by the other knight, but it was here that Ballia came into action. It was as though he was

trained for such battle, and wheeled away from the attacker, taking his master with him. Kanavah’s steed was a heavy one, since the rider needed a great mount, but Ballia was more lithe, more flexible in his turning, dashing, darting and rearing.

The knight of Miridon was surprised by the sudden cavorting of the other steed, and he exploded with anger. He raced towards the retreating horse and lifted his sword to slash at Balwone. Since the knight of Zagon was trusting his horse to move at the right time and in the right direction, this gave him a great advantage over his opponent. Ballia turned quickly and Balwone jabbed—though lightly—at the formidable body of Kanavah. The jab drew blood and a great roar emerged from the wounded man. He urged his horse forward to get away from Ballia, but the horse was quicker than the other mount and Balwone was upon him in a flash. He pierced the man lightly, and again drew blood. Again a savage roar, and again an attempt to escape the man who was upon him.

There were other cries, this time from the knights of Miridon who had never seen their large fellow knight in such desperate straits. Roget had sheathed his knife and was watching with glee and satisfaction. He could not forbear cheering, and in his anger the huge knight slashed at the squire. This drew a groan of reproach from all onlookers. Kanavah must have felt the reproach, and he drew his mount to a halt. Balwone drew back a little, waiting for the next move.

The knight was crimson in the face. ‘I cannot fight with such tactics,’ he said. ‘I thought this would be as we always battle, but you have a hell-horse there, and I have no mount to match him. I therefore refuse to do battle under these conditions.’

There was a murmur of disapproval from his fellow knights, and the man knew he had been disgraced.

Balwone dismounted. ‘Descend, Kanavah of Miridon, and let us fight like men on the ground.’

The other knight could not believe his ears. Ballia had trotted gracefully away, leaving the field to the two contestants.

Almost before Balwone realised it, the mounted knight rushed at him and slashed with his sword. Balwone jumped back, barely being missed. He turned rapidly time and again as his opponent

sought to press his advantage. Now, however, there was an outcry of protest by the group of knights, and Kanavah knew his murder of Balwone would not be countenanced. He also believed he could do better than his opponent on the ground, and he dismounted. His squire rushed in to grasp the reins of the heavy mount, leading him away.

Kanavah rushed at the supple Balwone, who quickly stepped aside and gave a slash at his angry enemy. That knight rounded on him, waving and wielding his weapon indiscriminately. So the knight of Zagon avoided him, drawing him in, then again evading him until the heavy man was breathless and could scarcely run. In one of his sudden dashes he slipped and was on the ground. In a moment Balwone was upon him, making sure he was not within striking distance but from beyond the head of the fallen one, pinning his slim blade to the man's neck.

A cry went up from the onlookers. Balwone could not detect whether it was a groan of protest or one of satisfaction at the defeat of his unscrupulous opponent. The fallen man let his sword-hand fall to his side—the signal of surrender—and Balwone withdrew his sword, the one that could have killed the other knight.

The glaring knight scrambled to his feet, this time with the aid of his squire, and he limped back to the small throng of watchers. It was obvious that he was squirming in their sight and that he had been dishonoured forever. The strange thing was that where he had been pierced or the sword had flicked him there was now little or no blood.

Balwone noticed this with a great sense of wonder. He was strengthened in his spirit that he had at no time felt anger, and nothing of a murderous desire had risen in him. He had been calm, calculating the moves of the other, but never intending to kill him. This, too, his opponent had realised, and he stared with curiosity, knowing he had been deliberately spared.

One of the other knights addressed Balwone.

'We have heard of your skill as a man of arms,' he said, 'but until now have never witnessed you in action. As knights of Miridon we congratulate you. You have acted according to the rules of chivalry and honour, and we are ashamed that our

fellow knight did not do the same. The King of Miridon shall surely hear of this. As it is, we grant you passage through this part of the kingdom. You may surely make your camp here tonight and no harm will befall you. We bear the shame of what has happened, and pray your pardon and request your friend-ship.'

With this speech the knight bowed. Balwone bowed in return. The defeated knight silently mounted his horse, and his head was down. Even so, as Balwone looked at him he saw the terrible hatred in the man's eyes. This, too, although his life had been spared. By the rules of battle justice would not have been infringed had the knight of Zagon pierced the neck of his killer-opponent.

When they had gone Balwone felt for the sheathed sword at his side, but it was gone. His own sword was heaped up with his other weapons in the camp, and the son of Facius wondered at the strangeness of it all. He even asked himself whether it had all happened. Roget, who read his mind at this point, told him it had assuredly happened.

Ballia was given a special petting and stood calmly under this act of affection. He was given special grain as a reward but took this as though it were of no great importance.

The two men talked long into the night for they knew that next day they might have to part. They sought to understand the appearance and disappearance of the sword. The secret lay with Flamgrid, but this they did not know. For that matter they did not mind not knowing. Balwone trusted simply that it would come when needed and go when not needed. Tomorrow he would have to be done with his own weapons, even though he was facing the most dangerous part of his mission.

That night the two weary men slept well, and Morna and Ballia kept vigil. For some reason or other the camp was left untouched. No dreams assaulted the refreshing sleep of the knight and his squire.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## The Forest–Jungle of Allein

WHEN the two men awoke it seemed to them it was still night and that the dawn had not broken. The time-sense in their mind by which they always worked told them it was the hour of dawn and so they rose. What had kept darkness beyond the early dawn was a thick mist or fog that blanketed all things. Even so, they made their way through it and refreshed them-selves at a stream nearby. Balwone knew his hour for wearing mailed armour was over. He dressed himself in forest-green raiment and a stout brown jacket of soft animal hide. On his head was a peaked cap and on his feet strong leather shoes which were nevertheless soft and pliable. He might need silent movement in the jungle–forest they called ‘Allein’.

Both men endured the mist without complaint, and they were rewarded. Soon a great golden ball shone through the pure white fog, and it rose with grandeur until the mist bowed out, as though in worship it had prepared the way for a unique introduction to the great glory which ruled the universe—the sun—warming it, and giving it life.

The two companions watched it in silence until it was established and the day had fully broken. Then they set about breaking their fast and talking openly in a way they knew they had not conversed previously. They had sensed over the months that at the last they would share everything they knew of the momentous event that lay ahead. Even so, they had anticipated this last discussion with some trepidation.

It was Roget who opened the conversation.

‘Master Balwone,’ he said. ‘I heard Flamgrid, our teacher, call thee “Balwone the Great”. Why should this be, and how has it

come about? Since no man is great except in the eyes of others, why art thou called “Great”?’

The knight pondered for a moment. ‘I do not rightly know,’ he said, ‘but by now you will know much of this mission on which we are travelling. The truth is that it is not I who am great but the Most High. He, in turn, has designated his servant Massia to heal the world from its wounds, and mankind from its foolishness and its pollution. Somewhere in our history men rebelled against the Most High who had brought them into being, as indeed he had brought all things into being.

‘From the day of man’s evil until now all whom he made have opposed him. Some have done it in highly religious ways, aping the righteousness of the Most High but not having it in their hearts nor in their minds. This is partly because, out of what the Most High created as celestial creatures, some have given them-selves over to darkness, and they seek to draw us into their com-pany.’

‘If the Most High is light, then how could the things he created be darkness or have to do with darkness? Master Balwone, I have often pondered this, and more so since we joined thy master, Flamgrid. If the Most High is pure, then what he has created must be pure. If there is darkness, then has he created it, and if not, why is it present?’

Balwone said gently, ‘The ancients pondered this and they came to many answers. These answers do not satisfy the great sages for they insist that the Most High is ever light. In him is no darkness at all. Nevertheless we are faced with the fact that darkness arose with the powers that he brought into being. The most we can say is that within themselves they became corrupted. They sought to be as the Most High. This was their evil, and ever remains so.’

Roget muttered fiercely, ‘I cannot see how that which was made pure can turn itself into darkness.’

‘There is a deceit in darkness itself,’ said Balwone, ‘but it is a deceit I cannot explain. I can only say it is a becoming what one never was and what one should never be. It is a corruption of refusing the communion that all things have with the Most High by nature but which they refuse to have by choice.’

'Ah!' said Roget triumphantly. 'That "by choice" must indeed be the key. The Most High has his own choice and if he gives such to his creatures, then they may choose to turn against the one who brought them into being. It is strange that he allowed them such choice.'

Balwone said mildly, 'What would we be without choice? We would not have dignity. Even the criminal has his choice so that he cannot then blame others for what he does. So we have choice, although—as the ancients have said—such choice may often destroy us.'

'As it was nigh on destroying me,' muttered Roget. Now he was nodding his head as though light was dawning upon him.

'If we keep speaking thus,' said the knight, 'then we will be conversing for many days. We will need to open my thick wallet and listen to those wiser than us. Then we shall see things as one sees trees that make the forest. We need, however, to draw back a long distance in order to see the forest as a whole. Having done this we will not know all things that inhabit it, and so we will only partly know the forest.'

He paused and then turned his eyes on Roget. At that moment they were sad, but had the other man known it they were the eyes of Facius and Merphein, the eyes of Flamgrid and the Shem-gridions such as Zemgrid and Femgrid and Sophius the son of Pirinus. They were the eyes of the ancients—the sages and the prophets—and, for all anyone knew, the eyes of the Massia and even the Most High.

'Time was,' said Balwone, 'when there was a great rest across the earth and all things lived in peace and were content to know love and joy, for these things were their life and the ways of their life. Then came the darkness whose coming we have not as yet explained beyond what I have told you. With the darkness love and peace and joy did not vanish as did our early morning mist, but, instead, great heavenly powers took these things to themselves. They coveted love and peace and joy, but they cut themselves off from the great source of them—the Most High himself.'

'They cut themselves off as a babe might from its mother's body at birth. No babe can do that, but all the exercises of the

dwellers in darkness, and the makers of darkness were as those who slashed their connections with the Most High. In so doing, they turned the things of love, joy and peace into things of their own. Roget, we may say that love became self-love, joy became joy derived from within themselves and peace a serenity they could not know until they controlled and fostered it from their own resources.'

Roget was puzzled. 'What resources do powers of darkness, and human powers that are evil, have of themselves?'

'In truth, none,' said Balwone, 'but they filch from the Most High. What they have he has given as gifts, and these gifts he will not withdraw. This must be according to his wisdom and his intention for the end which must surely come one day.'

When he looked at Roget with a fixed gaze his eyes were deep with sorrow and pain, and he said sadly, 'You and I know all these things because we, too, are children of darkness until the light comes to us, as did the sun this day through the enshrouding mist.'

'The mist was not strong enough,' said Roget eagerly.

'Not strong enough,' agreed Balwone solemnly. 'Even so, darkness can do terrible things. It can breed dragons and beasts, daemons and ghouls. It can cause the human race to turn to hatred and violence. It can also cause wars and horrors beyond imagination, some of which we saw in the city of Cotillon and many of which I have seen in my years of travels, let alone what I have read in the ancient manuscripts. You also know the horror of taking the lives of others as Kanavah would have taken mine with great passion of vengeance. To this point our human race has come.'

'Is there, then, no solution?' asked Roget.

Balwone looked at him in surprise. 'I thought you had come to see that the Most High has laid his plans for such a liberation, such a transformation of the human race, and for a judgment upon the powers who refuse his will and do not obey his com-mands.'

The squire looked pitifully at the knight. 'These things I have heard thee say, and also have I heard Flamgrid say, but to me they have been the vapourings of men who are deemed to be wise.'

My wisdom is an earthy kind and looks at the reality about me. As men are, so will they always be, and as are the dark powers, so they will continue to be. Nothing in that sense ever changes.'

Balwone spoke in intimate mode. 'I tell thee, friend Roget, that thou art no longer a murderer. Thou wast but art not. Thou art freed from hatred and bitterness, and hast a new love that never was, or had it ever been pure and true and hopeful, it nevertheless became polluted by bitterness and wrath, and was filled with hopelessness and despair. Now thou art loved and art changed. How sayest thou that nothing changes? All things change under the passion of love.'

'Thou speakest truly,' said the squire with passion. The heat of his understanding showed up on his face and in the eyes that were now glowing. 'Yes, thou speakest truly. Yet how can one man here and there be changed, and not the whole world?'

'Ah!' said Balwone. 'The whole world can be changed. This is our venture. This is our mission. The Most High has ordained the way. On yonder mountain, as yet not fully seen by us, there is a great egg that is of pure gold. Such the world has not seen nor made in its entire existence. Through some dreadful and terrible pain this egg has come to the human race, but it must be nurtured. It must be so cared for, and so nourished by the warmth of pure love, that it will one day break open, and the love that unites the human race, and all celestial creatures, will come to our universe.'

Roget stared at his master. 'But this is madness!' he cried. 'Whence comes such a thing, and who creates it?'

'Roget,' said Balwone slowly, 'the Most High *is* love, but this love we have only glimpsed. Men—even wise men—discuss this love and the truly wise admit they do not understand it. Only when men love one another does some of its truth break forth, but not until the Most High gives revelation will the creatures of his creation understand.'

Roget sat as though frozen. Then he began to tremble. 'I have seen such love even in the eyes of a prostitute when life has granted her a child. I have seen it in the look of a she-bear as she fondles her cub. I have seen it when a man who was dying of

hunger and pain was given the portion of another so that he might live. I have seen it in many places. Then love must exist. I am convinced of it. Thou, Balwone, hast shown love to me, and this is what makes thee great. I also love thee, though I was but a serf by birth and a murderer by trade. Yes, this love is indeed a won-derful thing.'

His eyes were filled with the darkness that pain brings. 'Just as I find my love for thee, thou art leaving me. Thou wilt go into the dark jungle of Allein, and giants and creatures will seek thy life. All things will work to prevent thee from reaching the holy mountain, and when thou dost, that mountain is so high that even thou canst not scale it.'

'All you say is true,' said Balwone tenderly, 'but there is a thing the sages call "grace". It comes from the Most High, and if a man is weak enough in humility, he will be enabled to do exploits impossible otherwise for human creatures to achieve.'

Roget remained silent. After a time he raised his eyes and looked at Balwone as though he had found in him a person he had never known.

'Thou art indeed Balwone the Great. Thou wilt assuredly bring love to the world. The new age is dawning, the age that we have longed for but have never believed possible to come to birth.'

The credo of the former murderer was plain enough, but the trust of the man brought uneasiness to the inner being of the knight. It would not have surprised him to see the old dragon and his ilk come thundering towards him filled with fiery imprecations and accusation. 'Balwone the Great, indeed!' would have been their scornful and contemptuous cry. Their hideous mocking laughter he seemed now to feel in his heart and mind, and his eyes were so pained that he turned from his friend and stared towards the dark jungle, fearful of venturing from this peaceful spot in the forest of Miridon.

Roget sensed his friend's pain. He said slowly, 'When a great thing is just in the offing, and a mighty happening is about to be, then our hearts turn to water and we cannot believe. When I was made squire I cried with the glory and the wonder of it, but my heart was melted and I had no belief in the reality thou brought to

pass. A murderer a squire? I could not in faith believe it. Yet it has come to pass.'

He stood and towered over the knight. He grasped Balwone by the shoulders. 'Bear up, great friend, and be according to thy destiny, Balwone the Great. It becometh thee. It sitteth well upon thy noble shoulders. By the Most High and all the sages and prophets, go forth with faith. Love shall come to birth. The golden egg shall bring forth its true progeny.'

The knight was deeply moved and he felt a new courage flow into him and along all his veins. He stood, shaking his head as though to free himself from some bondage of thought. He smiled at his squire and embraced him.

'Let us go, friend Roget,' he said, 'for it is the true hour, the time for seeking the golden egg, at last!'

His voice rose as he finished the sentence, and the two men, a trifle self-conscious from the conversation that had passed, attended to all things for the last stretch of their pilgrimage to the jungle-forest of Allein.

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Once on the road they had little time for conversation. They plodded quietly on, Ballia and Morna leading the way. At times they stopped and rested, sometimes drinking from their flasks, sometimes from a stream they saw as the forest thinned out and the pasture-lands appeared. The further they went the less the natural noises of the birds and the animals were heard, and even the breezes seemed without fervour and strength.

'I feel the matter to be very strange,' Roget once ventured, and his master nodded, deep in thought as he now seemed to be. Once when they rested, the squire asked a question.

'Why do they call the forest we are approaching "the jungle-forest of Allein"?'

'I think,' said Balwone, 'that in the Miridon language it means "the jungle of confusion and struggle; the forest without rest". Even so, I am not sure that its name has come from Miridon. It is a place known by the ancients—the sages and others.'

'That is strange, master,' Roget said. 'It would seem that no man lives in it, but why does not the kingdom of Miridon use it for its purposes of habitation and trade?'

'In truth,' said Balwone, 'it is a wasteland. It is in no kingdom, nor does any kingdom wish to claim it. It is said to be inhabited by terrible giants, and that none has ever passed through it to the holy mountain.'

'That is doubly strange,' muttered Roget. 'Methinks it is a sad and hapless waste.'

As they travelled, they perceived that no animal or bird was in sight although they had emerged from the jungle and were in country that was heavily grassed. Roget went on muttering his mystification.

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It was late afternoon when they reached the jungle-forest, and already the rays of the sun were being blotted out by the high jungle-giants of trees. To the men's eyes this whole land had a tinge of purple, a colour that spoke of loneliness and desolation. Yet they knew it to be inhabited by creatures that might be called 'mythical'.

They made camp on the edge of the vast wastelands, but the delight and joy of their native forests were missing. Whilst the grasslands were open and undulating, and had a silent beauty, they did not bring that exquisite sense of wonder that other scenes had brought. Because the pastures were bare of animals, and the houses of men and women, they felt the loneliness of it press upon them. They even went about their work in silence, and no warm whinny came from the horses, whilst Morna remained unusually quiet.

When they ventured near to the forest for dead timber for their fire, it seemed to them that the eyes of creatures were upon them, but such creatures were soundless, and the dead quietness was near to uncanny. Even the firewood burned slowly, as though it were reluctant to give out hearty light. Even so, they cooked their meal over the hot coals and lay back to rest from the day's weariness.

Roget was the first to sleep, Morna lay silent and the horses dropped their heads in the way such animals take sleep. Balwone could not sleep. He was pondering the morrow and his entrance into the jungle. His mind dredged up many a saying that related to this dreary and dangerous place. He shivered much, and did not know whether it was the cold or his inner dread of the battle ahead.

Once, when he was almost frozen by the lack of warmth, he threw upon the fire great branches with dead leaves, but there was no response of the sparks he so loved to see. The flames did leap higher than before and they seemed to send up long shadows that looked like the talons of great creatures. He even thought he saw such creatures passing to and fro beyond the first lines of trees, but if they were there then they were insubstantial, ghostly and as mythical. There were no sounds of footsteps or rustlings. Balwone longed even for the mournful hoot of an owl, but all remained in deathless silence.

Finally the knight succumbed to sleep, and none saw the great creatures that circled over their camp, and even Morna missed their presence, as though the party of men and beasts was drugged by some mysterious influence. Ballia did not stamp a hoof nor even flick his tail. It was as though an unnatural peace which was no true peace had covered the hours of the night.

Towards dawn the large-winged creatures returned to the forest, as though to report the reconnaissance they had made and to prepare the denizens of the badlands for the penetration Balwone's party would make on the morrow.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### The Passage of Balwone the Great

THE MIST having cleared, the sun shone upon the jungle-forest of Allein. In the late afternoon it had seemed to be dark and impenetrable.

It had also had a note of silent brooding: the absence of songs and cries of birds, animals and insects being a strange feature of it. Now, in the morning sun, it looked to be a place of great, unusual and exotic beauty. Even so, it could not have been described as lovely for it had an atmosphere which bespoke mystery and even some kind of a doom. Yet it was remarkable and excited the minds of its viewers. Trees, higher than anything the men and animals had seen, seemed to tower into the azure blue of the cloudless sky. Both men marvelled at the height and strength of them. Great vines and creepers had wound themselves around the jungle-giants, festooning the trunks and branches, and flowers of all kinds hung from both trees and vines. It seemed there was also a heavy undergrowth of giant ferns and exotic shrubs. The heavy clusters of blossom on vines and trees were remarkable to behold. Doubtless—the men conjectured—there would be fruits also. The forest was in vast contrast to the grasslands that surrounded it, and other forests whose vegetation was not like this one. Its trees, creepers and vines seemed part of an Eastern land, and not of the cold Northern clime.

'It is strange,' said Balwone, 'that there be flowers of such size and glorious hue and yet no other life appears—no birds to draw the nectar and no butterflies to hover.'

Roget nodded, but his mind was on the journey into the thick jungle.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘our teacher Flamgrid bade us go with thee but a distance. I must first return, and Morna and then Ballia—when he has completed his task—will return to me. Thou art clad in clothing that befits such travel, but thou wearest no sword. Doubtless thy golden weapon will be given at the right time. What then do I wear—my sword, my long knife, and do I carry my spear?’

Balwone said, ‘Your going with me is but a travel of short distance. I doubt you will meet the giants with whom I must make battle. Wear what you will for yours is a different conflict. You will fight against real enemies, and not those who are mythical. Mine is another kind of battle; so wear what you will, but do not war against men as I have done. Kanavah was not destroyed for the weapon I used was against his soul and not his body. Thus, doubtless, I will fight with the enemy I will meet. Besides, your journey is a short one. Your horse also will go with you but the short distance, and you then shall both return.’

‘Master,’ Roget replied, ‘no man has entered this forest and returned to tell the tale. Shall I then return?’

‘As I have and as Flamgrid has said, you shall return. You are not coming with me to pass through to the holy mountain. It will be known to the dark powers that you are no foe to them. Their care is not for you. All who have entered this domain before have sought the holy mountain to which this forest is the barrier. That is why they did not return. It is simply for you to report to others that I have penetrated beyond where you can go. Morna and Ballia will also return and you may take my armour and the animals back to Zed and then to Manignia.’

‘But master,’ said Roget, ‘wilt thou not return soon, thy mission being accomplished?’

A thoughtful shadow came over the knight’s countenance. ‘Time is as another thing where I now go. I do not know whether years may not be but a moment there, and a moment but years here. So do not tarry overlong. When some weeks have passed, then you must return with the news you have, that I have gone into the jungle and have pressed on to the high mountain. It may happen that I may not reappear for some years. We do not know. If my mission succeeds, then soon all the world will know.’

The squire was puzzled for he felt his vocation was being unfulfilled. His heart was heavy as he piled armour and weapons in a heap with the other camp gear. He made sure the packhorse was given a long tether on the grasslands and also provided with grain to eat pending his return. He felt in his own depths that something was amiss but could not understand what it might be.

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It was there—on the edge of that vegetation—that they saw the first evidences of life. Butterflies of enormous size were floating around the flowers, and other insects were also sucking the nectar of the blossoms. So prodigious were these creatures that a trace of fear entered the minds of the two watchers. Even so, they were heartened that there was life and so they sought to enter the forest. There was a path of sorts—one that probably was the pad of animals, for it was unlike the paths men make. Along this they travelled. Certainly entrance was not denied them.

Once having entered they could hear sounds but they were the noises of those who move by stealth, and so there remained a silence that hung heavily over all things. They had made their way into the place only some few yards when the sounds seemed to close around them, and as they progressed more deeply into the jungle they felt themselves surrounded by a strong presence. Still being of a stout heart they pressed on. Ballia was stepping high and nervously, but Roget’s horse was of a phlegmatic nature and seemed to have no sense of the strange world about it.

Once they saw a great serpent slide across the path before them, but it was gone before they could fully know its length and thickness. Even so, they knew it to be enormous. Sweat stood out on the foreheads of the two travellers, and Ballia stepped sideways with caution. As they progressed, the rustlings grew in volume and the light from the sun lessened. At times there was a gloom of shade that was depressing, but the party pressed on.

At one time they heard new sounds of rustlings and these were above them. They were amazed to see great birds wheeling between the forest-giants. These winged creatures were unlike anything they had ever seen and, as the men and horses

approached, they gave forth strange cries that sounded like the calls of crows but whose notes were harsher and louder. At the noise of them Ballia stopped in his tracks and stamped his front right foot. For a moment the noises ceased, and the jungle was silent. Then the noises began afresh, and even increased in volume; yet nothing came to attack them.

They came to what seemed to be a glade. The trees had thinned out and rough grass was chest high to the animals. In the centre of the glade were rude huts, roughly made of woven grass and sheets of bark. They saw no life, and were about to proceed past it, when men in primitive clothing, with bearded faces and long manes of hair, sprang up from the grass and rushed towards them.

To Balwone's surprise no sword appeared at his side. He sensed, then, that if there were to be a battle it would depend on Roget, and indeed Roget had his hand upon his own sword, but the men raised their hands in protest, vigorously shaking their heads. They were weaponless and their demeanour was not threatening.

One who appeared to be their leader came up to Balwone and Ballia. At first to the knight he was of fearsome visage, so long was the hair of his face and his beard, and so penetrating were his glittering eyes, but Balwone heard the gentleness of the voice and was disarmed. The other men gathered around, attending upon their leader as though they were proud of him.

'I have come to warn you not to go further into this place of Allein,' he said. 'You will be destroyed by the great giants. They never let a person through to the holy mountain for they fear that mountain. They fear lest a man may ever climb its height and find the place of the Most High, for then they will be defeated.'

Balwone settled sideways on Ballia, who stood calm and firm. The knight looked down at the men.

'Who are you, and why do you live here? What find you in this place of Allein?'

The leader's eyes softened from their glitter and he seemed sorrowful. 'We are the ones the giants have defeated,' he said. 'Like you, we once came with high hopes. We were sure we

were servants of the Most High and of his great Massia. We had tasted of his reign and sought to press through beyond the land of giants and come to the holy mountain.'

'You sought to read the holy egg of love?' said Balwone, astonished.

'In truth, Sire, we had not so much as heard of a holy egg of love. We simply knew that the Most High is beyond all gods—even gods we had known—and that his powers are greater. We wished to go to his holy mountain, to have reached that we would have been content.' He paused and looked earnestly at Balwone. 'It is only since our defeat that we have heard of this myth of the love.'

'It is no myth,' said Balwone. 'Your eyes cannot behold the high mountain for you are within this strange jungle, and the trees are high. You live in hovels—you who would have been the servants of the Most High.'

'Highness,' said the leader, 'we are still servants of that One, but our state is hapless. Yet we have heard tell that he abandons none. Thus we stay in this place and the giants come not hither except to gaze and mock. They have no desire to destroy us. It is enough for them that we are conquered.'

Roget had been looking with great pity upon them. 'Is it not then possible to escape this place altogether? Can you not make your way to freedom and live in that?'

'Freedom does not lie from where you come,' answered the spokesman. 'We left all to be free on yon mountain. Once a man has seen that high place he can never be content with what was. Even if never permitted to pass the giants he will stay here and hope. It may be that Massia will come and then we shall be free.'

Balwone felt again the strange and unhappy stirring of his heart at the mention of the name of Massia. One part of him cried for this Great One to come and liberate all men—through love—but another part of him desired to bring that love to all the world, even to these hapless creatures.

'Why should you stay here when there is genuine freedom back from where we came? It is not for all to attain to the holy mountain in this life. It is not the destiny of all.'

‘It is the desire of many,’ said the leader. ‘Just to be nearer to the mountain than we were is enough, albeit our spirits have been broken by these savage giants.’

The spokesman turned to Roget. He seemed to know this squire was not to follow his master through to the mountain.

‘Be you advised,’ he said gently, ‘to now turn about or you will become as one of us. It is in your lord and master to fight, yea, and mayhap to win over these giants, though none yet has done that in his own earthly powers. You can go no further in order to help your master. Return, then, to your kith and kin, and do not become such as we are.’

Roget looked thoughtful. Then he said, ‘It is not in my heart to desert my master for he has done so much for me.’

Balwone said to him, ‘I sense the time is near when you must return. This much you can tell Flamgrid and the others, and they may search this wisdom or even cry to the Most High to help me through to the peak of yonder mountain. Roget, go whilst it is time.’

Roget shook his head. ‘I will be one with you until we meet the giants. Then I shall return.’

The leader of the vanquished creatures said, ‘Once you meet the giants there is no return. If they spare you, you may be permitted to become as one of us, but they have dreadful beasties which obey them, and they will bring you to death. Flee now, whilst there is time.’

‘What are these beasties?’ asked Roget earnestly.

‘They are called “Clutterers”,’ said the man. ‘They have wide wings with hooks on them, and they cling to a man and take the breath and life from him so that he is but a shadow of his former self. He is a derelict. He wanders helplessly until he dies of his own weakness. Clutterers are a terrible breed. Flee them whilst it is time.’

Roget set his jaw. ‘I will smite these creatures, and lessen their number in this jungle.’

The defeated pilgrims began to mutter among themselves, then to wave their arms, to protest against the squire’s decision. They kept shaking their heads in sorrow for the knight’s squire.

Suddenly the leader raised his head and he listened. Then he cried, ‘Flee! Flee, all! They are coming—the great giants and their Clutterers.’

Without a moment’s hesitation the vanquished creatures ran through the grass to their hovels—all, that was, but the leader. He looked pleadingly at Roget.

‘Flee, my friend. The giants and the Clutterers will not touch us for we are defeated. As yet you are not. I have a great desire to go with you, and to find my life again. If you would take me with you, then I would be the first pilgrim who has returned to tell the tale.’

Balwone smote his thigh. ‘Roget, my friend. Do as this one tells you. Take him with you, and begone. This must be the reason for which you came into this place. You can take our friend to Flamgrid and he will learn much from your return.’

Roget hesitated, but before he could make up his mind, a flock of curious creatures circled about the heads of the two men and their horses.

‘Oh!’ cried the leader. ‘It is too late. I should be within my hovel if I would escape death. Now these things be upon me. They will suck us dry and leave us to perish!’

Roget bent low and plucked up the terrified creature, swinging him behind him on to his steed. He waved a hand to Balwone and urged his horse into life.

The Clutterers swarmed about, above the horse, but Roget had drawn his sword. He left the great gelding to make his way towards the exit from the jungle, and he slashed with his sword. The dreadful creatures came near to him, but many of them were cut, and green blood flowed from them over the fleeing pair.

Balwone wheeled about to see if the giants had arrived, but there was neither sight nor sound of them and so he acted as a rearguard to his servant. There was a sword in his hand, the one with which he had wounded the dragon.

The foul flock of hook-winged creatures left off their pursuit of Roget and turned their attention to the knight. He had drawn his slender golden weapon and was using it devastatingly. Several of the dreadful creatures fell to the earth and seemed mortally wounded. Others of them flew low over the knight and his horse

but just outside of the reach of the deadly sword. Balwone leapt to his feet, balanced on Ballia, and that mount moved with every motion of its master. One by one the Clutterers fell to the earth, uttering their dreadful cries which were more terrible in the death-throes than in their life of threatening.

The flock lessened as the battle raged, but it did not cease until the glade was littered with the quivering foe. When the last cry had ceased and a heavy silence had fallen over all things, the hairy and defeated pilgrims emerged slowly from their hovels.

They could not believe what they saw. The carnage was complete. They crept silently up to Balwone and knelt around Ballia, looking up with awe.

'The like has never been seen,' said one of them.

'Never been seen,' they said in a chorus.

They looked for their leader and could not find him.

'Where has our leader gone?' they asked the knight. 'Where is Barbarer?'

'He has gone with my squire, on his horse,' said Balwone. 'He has gone to escape this jungle.'

'He has gone!' they shrieked. Their high cry had amazement, joy and dread all mixed.

'He has gone,' said Balwone, 'and if you have any sense, you will follow them.'

'Follow?' they asked in bewilderment.

The knight nodded. 'If these Clutterers can be defeated, so can giants also. You do well to go now.'

He felt pity for their mixed joy and terror. One part of them wished to flee, to go to a liberty they had once known. The other part had long been conditioned to be of a prisoner's mind.

He thought to encourage them and so he lifted up his voice and roared as one in command.

'Go!' he thundered. 'Be not an excrescence upon the earth. You, made by the Most High, honour your great Lord! Go!'

They looked at him, the terror still there, but the eyes filling with joy. They gave but one look at their pathetic hovels, and their voluntary prison place, and they turned to flee. Morna, heeding a silent command from Balwone, accompanied them out of the forest.

There were carking cries from a few of the dying Clutterers as though they would have their voices heard and call back the refugees, but in no time they were out of sight and—Balwone was sure—were all but gone from the jungle. He pictured their wild joy as they came into the grasslands and saw the vast undulations of pastures which told them of their liberty. He almost envied them, but he knew he had work to do.

He looked down at the carnage of the queer creatures but there was no pity in his heart. They had had no pity upon the pilgrims of the Most High, and now they had suffered their deserts.

\* \* \*

Even as he stared down at them he heard a fearsome sound which appeared to come from distance. The earth underneath them shook and trembled. Ballia flung up his head and his eyes flashed fire. The steed stamped and pawed at the earth and neighed at high pitch until it sounded like a scream never before uttered in Balwone's knowledge.

Instead of waiting, it wheeled until it had encircled the prison camp of the late pilgrims and then it stood, front legs apart, its back arched, awaiting the enemy which was coming.

Finally the enemy came, pushing aside the great forest-giants as though they were but saplings, and he stood towering over the knight and his steed. Balwone felt the giant could stoop and pluck them both up without difficulty. Instead, he stood peering at the dead Clutterers.

When he perceived that his flock of servants had been destroyed, he gave a great roar, and so thunderous was it that the earth shook and the trunks of the tall trees were set to trembling. One hand pointed down to the intruders into Allein.

'I will smite thee,' he cried, 'and I will have thee for pulp in my hand.'

'Not so,' said Balwone, flourishing his golden sword about his head. 'It is I who will have you.'

It was then the earth began to shake, and this time it was from the trembling of the giant. He was clearly shaken at the sight of the sword.

His voice dropped to what must have been a whisper for a creature of his size.

'Thou hast the golden sword,' he said. 'Then thou must be a servant of the Most High.'

He stared with growing rage. 'Art thou then Massia himself?'

'That I am not,' said Balwone. 'They call me Balwone the Great. I am come into these lands that I might reach the holy mountain and that there I might view the golden egg of love.'

The knight of Zagon was amazed at the change in appearance of the giant. He seemed to diminish, to be reduced in height and size and, though he was still huge compared with Balwone, he was not formidable as he had been.

His voice also had changed. Instead of the arrogance there was some respect. He constantly eyed the golden sword as though its slender being fascinated him.

'I will give thee much for your feeble weapon,' he said.

'It may be that *I* am feeble,' said the knight, 'but this my weapon is not. Nor may you buy it from me. It is not given to me to sell, and if I could sell, what could you give that would equal its power and its beauty?'

'I have much to give,' his opponent said. 'I have ever given the human race great pleasure, great joy, and I have helped them find power and fame.'

'What then, is your name?' asked Balwone.

'They call me Sarxia,' he said, 'but in truth I am the joy of all men. I give them freedom to do what they will.'

'What then of those hairy creatures who have been your prisoners?' asked the knight of Zagon.

'Ah!' sighed the giant. 'I would have given them great things for their lives but they refused.'

His face puckered and became crimson. 'They refused my gifts. They were fools. They have escaped, but they will be back, pleading for the security that they have lost. They will come pleading for the freedom they can have, even from the Most High himself. All men are made free by Sarxia.'

Balwone suddenly felt a change coming over him. He was staring into the eyes of the great giant, and a dream was coming to him that he—Balwone the Great—was free even from the

Most High. He was at liberty to be whom he really was—free from all, and free to be himself. He felt joy running through his body. It was like vintage wine to his taste, fire to his bones and surging delight in all his veins.

The eyes of the giant held him entranced, and his dream grew in size until it exploded and all was light and a fiery desire that left him helpless with ecstasy. He thought he would swoon in that moment, the moment when the giant stretched out his hand to grasp the golden sword.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## The Battle with the Giants

**B**ALWONE was dazed with the wonder and joy of the life into which he was entering. All memory of the hairy creatures in their misery, and the horrible creatures who would have destroyed him, was departing, and in front of him was a high and noble dream. In it he was truly 'Balwone the Great', and it seemed he was about to be 'Balwone the Greatest'. He felt great wonder surge through his mind. The Most High himself seemed to dwindle until he was powerless.

It was not that he lost his great aim of scaling the holy mountain and coming to the mysterious sanctuary of the golden egg. No: that was still in mind, but now it shone as a great venture that only he could undertake. With this giant beside him nothing would prevent him fulfilling his aim.

Yet even in his high imaginations he noticed—though without alarm—that the hand of the giant was moving towards his sword. So infatuated was he with his own will and pride that he would have allowed the giant to take the sword, but at that very moment there was a shrill neighing from Ballia, and it reared into the air, almost unseating the knight. It bucked and it screamed shrilly. It turned and cavorted. It wheeled and it stamped. It gave a high cry that rang through the forest and echoed back until Balwone's ears were ringing.

At that moment he came to his senses. He snatched back the sword which was almost in the grasp of his opponent. The grip he had on the sword seemed to send a stream of wisdom through his entire body and he remembered the words of the prophets and the sages.

Anger and indignation grew in him. Not fearing the huge creature before him, and being at a height to do battle with him

because he was seated upon Ballia, he raised his sword and slashed so that the blow cut into the vast chest of the creature.

'I know you!' shouted Balwone. 'I have met you before. You are but an offspring of the great dragon himself. You are one of his ilk. Many a time you have come to me to make me dream of greatness and of despising the world about me, and my fellow creatures. Sarxia you may call yourself, and I know not the meaning of that name, but I know who you are.'

With that he gave blow after blow with the sword, and the giant reeled before his onslaught. Ballia was adding to the noise with shrill whinnying.

The great creature rallied and brought its mighty fists down upon the knight, and Balwone was shaken in every bone. Nevertheless his sword came up again and the giant retreated with dread in its eyes.

Ballia took him forward at great speed and as he passed the giant his sword slashed until the blood flowed from the neck. Ballia wheeled about in a trice and Balwone dealt another blow, this time to the back of the giant, and the sword sank in. It was then the giant collapsed, sinking to the ground, blood flowing from his mouth in a red torrent. Its head rolled sideways and the dreadful eyes of the creature looked up at the knight.

Its laugh was as dreadful as the leering look of the eyes.

'You will never destroy me,' he said. 'None has ever done that, nor will do so.'

Why he said it Balwone did not know, but he cried, 'He will do it! Massia will do it,' and the dread was back in the eyes of the wounded giant.

Even so, he gasped through his pain. 'Nobody has ever destroyed Sarxia. I live for men and women, and they like the dreams I give them. They are ravished by the beauty they see. They grow drunk on my words and my ambition.'

Balwone felt a coldness around his heart. How was it that he knew so well the features of this wounded thing before him? He felt a horror growing within him for he had almost succumbed to the dream given him. He knew, then, that this was not the first time. He knew that the dragon had somehow impregnated him with some evil he could not wholly exorcise.

He drew aside from the wounded enemy and urged Ballia onwards into the heart of the jungle.

The last glimpse he had was of the eyes of the giant rolled back to see him, and he saw a dreadful mirth and a scorching scorn that all but withered his own heart. He thought of returning to deliver the death-blow, but because he knew the wounded giant must surely die, he flinched from an act uncharacteristic of his nature.

As he looked down at the sword he had a strange thought. He unsheathed the weapon and looked keenly at the blade. It had not one drop of blood upon it. Something of the meaning of the sword was coming to him—that which Flamgrid had not taught him—and his heart was caught in a marvelling, a wonder at the ways of wisdom and the Most High.

\* \* \*

Before dusk he found another glade of tall grass. He was wary of the fruit of the trees about him and so he took sparingly of his wallet of venison meat. He sucked at it, rather than chewed, and after the events of the day he found sleep quickly. His night was one of dreamless slumber, but when he awoke he did not feel refreshed. He sought out a dark pool and washed his body. He drew on some fruit, trying it with simple bites and waiting for ill effects. None came, and he was emboldened to save his own victuals for a more needy time.

Ballia had roamed looking for fodder that he trusted and when he returned to Balwone he seemed refreshed. The knight was soon on the stallion's back and they made their way through the thick stand of forest trees—great giants of the soil. In some places the sunlight had broken through the ceiling of high foliage, and the son of Facius and Merphein felt his mind clear. Some-thing in him wanted to sing, so he sang as he rode.

*A knight of Zagon found his life  
Lay in the lance and spear and sword,  
All valiant he, he jousting hard  
And fought all comers—lord by lord—*

*Until he wearied of this way  
And sought the dawning of a day  
When power and pelf and weaponry  
Might his full life no longer be.*

*The knight of Zagon born of two—  
Who lived in peace and truly knew  
That love alone can bring to joy,  
And taught this truth unto their boy—  
Found truth to be the only way  
To bring the world unto the day  
When power and pelf and weaponry  
Would its full life no longer be.*

*The knight of Zagon found a man  
Who knew the wisdom of the plan  
That the Most High of heaven's place  
Intentioned for the human race,  
That love alone should all unite  
To bring to earth his full delight,  
That power and pelf and weaponry  
Should its full life no longer be.*

*This knight abandoned power and pelf  
And sought the love for his true self.  
He seeks to bring the love to all  
And passes through the forest tall  
To reach the mountain—holy, high—  
That men may live and never die  
From power and pelf and weaponry  
But love its life should ever be.*

*With giants he meets upon the way  
And wrestles with them night and day.  
These giants are born of power and pelf  
And images of might and wealth  
And longings that the soul might be  
Of the Most High so fully free,  
That power and pelf and weaponry  
Should make for full autonomy.*

*He kills the giants within his soul—  
Those enemies so dark and foul—  
That seek to lead his heart astray  
From walking on the narrow way  
To heaven's mountain—holy hill—  
Where love shall all his being fill,  
That power and pelf and weaponry  
Should ever fully banished be.*

*There is but one doubt within his heart  
That he will play the lover's part,  
And love in all sincerity,  
And all his love most holy be,  
That all will love within this world  
Beneath love's banner he's unfurled,  
Till power and pelf and weaponry  
Transformed by love shall ever be.*

As he went his way he felt himself to be at liberty, so that in his heart he kept singing,

*Till power and pelf and weaponry  
Transformed by love shall ever be.*

and so filled with this love of love was his heart that he scarcely noticed he had arrived in a place of great beauty. The harshness of the great trunks rearing heavenwards with their strong creepers and twisted vines had given place to a grove of soft and gentle loveliness. Here the grasses were not bladed like swords, as had been the case in the grove of the hairy men, and somehow sunshine shone through their leaves so that their green was like gold. Soft ferns were like a couch under the trees, which were themselves filled with flowers or clustering fruits. The flowers were of varied colours—brilliant crimsons, soft mauves and violets, or rich amethysts. A fragrance, that was to Balwone unearthly, pervaded the place, and his eye caught a brook laughing its way beyond a ferny patch, and the sun glistened and shone like gold on its broken surface.

Feeling hunger he approached the trees of fruit and began to pluck one. Nothing seemed to warn him. Ballia stood patiently whilst he picked and tasted the exotic harvest. Having tasted the intense sweetness of the fruit he slipped one into Ballia's mouth and the stallion seemed to enjoy it. The knight plucked a few more of the succulent crop, and slipped from his mount and lay in pleasure on the grass. He stared up at the sky—a rare reprieve from the grimness of the jungle—and within a short time was asleep.

He was not sure whether he dreamed or was awake, but he felt the earth shake, and it seemed there was a rumbling throughout this part of Allein, but when he awoke it was not to see a giant but a most gracious lady. He stared up at her with amazement, wondering whether, in all his life, he had seen a female creature so rare and so beautiful. Of course, by association of ideas he thought of Merphein and Gothlic and Merom. He vaguely remembered being confronted by a beautiful woman in a vision, but this vision—if it was one—superseded whatever he had seen.

What reassured him was that the creature before him had no element of hardness, self-assurance, haughtiness or seductive femininity. Her eyes were gentle and of a deep blue, tending to violet. This made him think of Merphein for the gentle gaze was similar. The hair was as flaxen as Merom's but it shone with a golden gleam, the tresses flowing down to the waist of the fine form. The long unsleeved arms were slim and golden, and the body was draped in soft linen which was of pure white.

As a person comes out of a trance, so Balwone awoke fully and sat up. Then he stood and his eyes were level with her gaze as she looked at him. There was a depth in her eyes which he sensed none could fathom.

She said, 'I heard your song as you rode through the woods. I was afar off, but the words reached me and I am come, for man is *Erostika*, and I am known as the "Lady of Love".'

He gazed earnestly at her, possessed by her marvellous beauty and entranced by her gentleness. His tongue fumbled for words, and he spoke, almost blurting his sentences.

'It is love that I follow. Such love will alone bring the world to peace. I am a knight of love, and I purpose—under the Most High—to bring love to the world, love in all its wisdom.'

Her gentle gaze did not alter, but she questioned him. 'What then is the meaning of the wisdom of love?'

'Wisdom is knowing and doing the will of the Most High. Only by wisdom can we come to know wisdom, but the doing of wisdom is the act of loving.'

'Well spoken!' she said. 'You have indeed companied with the sages and the prophets, and well have you spoken of love. It is because you know love that I would accompany you on your journey. We could share the things of love.'

He felt fire in his body and helplessness in his muscles. Indeed he felt reduced to a weakness which was so glorious that he thought he would never desire anything other or more, again.

He was about to cry out, 'Dear Lady of Love, my journey would indeed be glorious if you would be with me,' but before he could say it, Ballia stamped his foot and he neighed in so deep a tone—a tone such as he had never used—that Balwone looked in surprise at him. He saw every muscle of the white stallion was stiffened, and his neck was arched as though he would tell his master something he should know.

He saw the Lady of Love stiffen a little and he was about to rebuke Ballia and tell the horse to be still, but Ballia even more stamped his right foot, his hoof pawing at the grass and soil of the lovely glade. Balwone thought that perhaps the fruit the animal had eaten had affected it, yet he himself had felt no ill effects.

Puzzled, he turned to the woman and saw afresh her glory, so that for the moment he forgot his mount's behaviour.

'Perhaps my Ballia is impatient to be on with our journey,' he said, but in that moment he saw a gleam in the eye of the woman. He seemed to detect some reluctance to accept Ballia in her countenance. His right hand slapped the stallion with affection.

'For all his impatience he is a great friend and companion,' he said. 'If you were to come with us he is powerful enough to carry us both.'

There again, in her eyes, was the gleam which he thought to be impatience.

'Let him be,' she said softly. 'If we were to travel together we could do so on foot. This jungle is a friend to all and we could have great joys of comradeship along the way.'

He felt his blood fire again and he looked with barely concealed longing at her beauty. In his heart was no prurience but only a rich sense of pulchritude. He had always loved loveliness, and no lovelier creature than her had ever been. Thoughts of Gothic and Merom faded and he had no thought for his mother.

'Gladly would I walk with you,' he said earnestly, but even as he spoke Ballia stamped his feet, reared somewhat, and then standing on his rear legs gyrated like horses Balwone had seen in travelling circuses. His eyes were fiery and they glowered at Balwone.

The knight had never seen his mount in this state and he was at a loss to know what to do. His thoughts were on the woman alone.

She spoke, 'Perhaps it is time for your fine stallion to return.'

The words puzzled Balwone. How did this lady know that there would be a time when Ballia should return to Roget and—if necessary—await the time when he, Balwone, would have completed his mission and returned to his friends?

When he turned to speak to her he caught a flash of hardness in her eyes, a look of anger, and she made a gesture of impatience. He saw that she wished to conceal these elements from him.

'My steed is a worthy one,' he said, half in apology. 'I cannot understand his behaviour but I ask pardon for it. I am sure he will accompany us both if we will walk together.'

At this, Ballia was silent but stood stock still. Balwone wondered but he spoke on.

'I would deem it a great privilege if you would walk with me for your name is really Love, and it is about love we could converse. There is much I need to learn and, without doubt, you could teach me.'

The gleam of anger gave place to a barely concealed look of triumph. She stood upright and there was a trace of hauteur in her. He felt her loveliness in every fibre of his being and he longed for her as he had never longed for any woman. It was as though his eyes were opened to his manhood by this woman, and such manhood must find its life and consummation in him, but through her. He wondered at the revelation of his masculinity, and realised it was through her superb femininity that this new

revelation had come to him. The emotional weakness he felt was no burden to suffer, but, in fact, an intense joy. He knew himself to be weak with love, infatuated as he had now become. Some-where in the wisdom writings someone had called out to be sus-tained with wine and apples since she was faint because of love, needing a physical recharge of strength from food that she might not die. He understood—at that point—how powerful love is.

It was then Ballia charged at the woman of glory and Balwone saw her eyes fill with fury. She put out a hand to strike the stallion but he galloped at her without impediment and, as he charged, there was a great rumbling of the earth and mighty reverberations shook the glade, the leaves of the grass turned to bladed swords, the fruit of the trees diminished and hardened and the flowers curled back and were gone. The softness of the glade became the general iron-hardness and harshness of the jungle and the trees reared upwards to the sky and the canopy of their branches shut out the sun. All had reverted to its former unloveliness.

In the place of the beautiful woman stood a great giant, balefully glaring down at him. There was contempt in every part of his strong features and when he snorted the scorn grew in volume.

‘You are the chivalrous knight,’ he sneered, ‘but you have a heart of flesh that is the flesh of all men—unclean and lustful. Your true love for others you betray in a passion for beauty—beauty that will not last but will decline to wrinkles, lost teeth, drooped flesh and feeble life. Your grand dreams are but the quiverings of vile maggots, and your ambitions leave you with the emptiness of the abyss. In your so-called love, there is no love.’

Ballia stood quietly now, contented that he had unmasked the deceit of the woman, glad that he had exposed the true nature of the giant-in-disguise. As for Balwone, he was shattered, horrified by his simple acceptance of the beauty of the glade and the loveliness of the woman. His dazed mind fought to rediscover the women he had forgotten—Merphein, Gothic and Merom—for he needed their memory to first purge and then counter his late madness.

The giant was not giving him time to recover but pressing the advantage of his surprise, though doubtless he was angry with the white stallion for having forced the change.

‘Who are you to think you are worthy and powerful enough to reach the holy mountain and to attain to its peak and then to foster the golden egg? If there were indeed a mountain that is holy, and an egg that is love, then you would be the last one to qualify for such a task. We shall yet have you among the hovels of the hairy men, and all your pretensions to high holiness shall be destroyed.’

Balwone knew this giant was aiming his weapon at his guilt of failure, and indeed he had almost failed in this case. The same weakness of passion that he had felt with the giant Sarxia he now felt with this giant. They were both of the character of the dragon. He doubted not but that the great dragon had been their mentor and, for that matter, still was. He knew his way to peace was not to defend himself but to go on the attack.

‘And what is your name, great giant? Is it “The Accuser”?’

The giant started at that question and roared in a blustering tone, ‘To give my name is to give you power, and this I will not do. Yet since I know you are of the Feeble People and have no power, I will tell you my name. It is “Undeceiver” for I rid people of their self-glory and their self-wisdom, and set them free to be real.’

As Balwone was about to speak he was startled by a whinny from Ballia. Such a whinny he had not previously heard from the animal. It was so close to human laughter that the knight was astonished. The reaction of the giant was that he grew crimson with anger and glared down at the laughing stallion whose voice sent mirth rollicking across the badlands.

‘You should teach your animal to respect greatness,’ he cried, but Ballia laughed even more. Balwone had not known that horses could chortle and chuckle. In his rage the giant stamped and stamped his feet.

‘You should be called “Deceiver”,’ said Balwone, ‘for your appearance as a beautiful woman was a wicked deception.’

‘Only those who wish to be deceived can be deceived,’ was the answer. ‘Your heart eats deceit as others do the bread that

helps them live. Now I undeceive you. You shall never reach the mountain nor scale its heights. You shall be revealed for what you are—an impostor and an arrogant person swollen with the pride of self-righteousness.'

'Enough,' cried Balwone. 'Let us to the battle!' He had felt his side and the sword was there. With a great leap he was up and onto the back of Ballia, and that animal was turned to the giant, its hind legs lowered and crouched against the earth, bent at the knees, whilst the knight's face was towards the huge creature who was still airing his contempt.'

'What?' he cried. 'You would fight me—Undeceiver? I shall quickly undeceive you about your supposed strength. I will grind you within my fists and you shall be manure for the soil!'

Balwone drew his slender sword and looked up at the towering creature. He wondered whether he could vanquish all this deceit, for the wisdom writers had told him that deceit can bedevil the human heart so that it knows not that it is under such subterfuge and sham.

Even so, his trust was not in 'power and pelf and weaponry' but in the sword which he was beginning to think of as 'the wisdom of love'.

It was in that mode he flourished the sword to tantalise the wrathful creature into battle, and Ballia stood firm under the feet of his master.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### More Giants to Battle

The giant rushed forward as though to sweep the man off his steed, smash him to the earth and crush him beneath his enormous booted feet. And so he might have done, but he saw in the hands of his opponent a slim, clear sword of shining gold, and his features changed. An appalled look came into his eyes and he stared with naked fear. Balwone was surprised and wondered what would happen.

'I will fight you, sword or no sword!' cried the baleful creature. 'That sword will not save you.'

'Nay!' cried Balwone, 'but it will destroy you as it destroyed Sarxia. So, on guard, Undeceiver, that I may undeceive you of your arrogance and vile accusations!'

With that cry Ballia rushed his knightly master towards the giant, and the son of Facius thrust upwards at his opponent, scarring his face with a thrust of his deadly weapon. With all his wisdom he was not to know that this sword bespoke powerful and wounding things into the heart of the one who thought his undeceiving was an utterance of the truth.

The giant staggered back, seeking to defend his face, but he was being slashed about the mouth and the eyes and the ears, and—as had happened with Sarxia—he collapsed on the sward. The same reverberations they had felt before again took place, and in the giant's place was the beautiful woman, but her beauty sadly scarred about lips and cheeks.

Balwone paused, horrified, and for a moment the sword hung loose in his hands. The glorious voice that had minutes ago enchanted his soul now rang in his ears, reproachful but gentle, and ever so seductive.

'You noble knight!' it cried. 'How could you destroy all that is beautiful? Know you not that I live within you as the innermost dream of your soul? Would you then deprive yourself of what is most glorious to you and is the very essence of your dreams?'

For a moment Balwone was under the spell of beauty and desire, until Ballia sent his scornful neighing like rocking laughter across the glade and, time and again, stamped his forefeet, rising and stamping the earth.

Within that movement Balwone's mind was once again disenchanted. 'Deceiver is your right name,' he said. 'You are no true woman such as I have seen in my other loves. You are a she-devil and you shall receive your due.'

With that he ran his sword through the breast of the shining woman before him, and she began to sink towards the earth, only to become again a rumbling, roaring giant that fought in his death-throes to destroy his enemy by piercing and baleful looks of lethal hatred.

Balwone noted with marvel in his mind that blood did not flow from the giant but a loathsome green fluid that gushed onto the bladed grass and sank in the earth, as the giant himself faded from sight, his last imprecations lost in half-smothered groans of bitter vituperations against the conquering knight.

Ballia backed away from the hideous death-writhings of the creature, and suddenly there was no sight of it. Balwone thought he saw the movement of a great dragon behind the palisade of trees growing closely together, but he thought he might have imagined it, so faint it was.

\* \* \*

Man and horse turned to draw away and resume their journey, when to their surprise they were faced by a wall of creatures that looked human but whose faces were empty of expression, their eyes as blank as are those of the dead. Since they represented a wall through which the two could not pass, Balwone chose to address them.

'And who may you be, you who look to us like humans? From whence have you come, and what do you do?'

One raised a hand in salute and the others followed suit.

'We be the pilgrims set for the holy mountain,' said the leader, 'and yet we be fodder for the terrible giants of this jungle. Once we could see clearly but now we are as without sight, though just now we beheld you slay the giant, Undeceiver, with the golden sword of the truth. Even though we are glad of his destruction, there are many other giants, and they allow us to live for they feed on us as they will.'

Balwone found his heart deeply troubled and Ballia stood silent as though in sympathy with the sad creatures.

'How do these giants feed on you?' he asked.

'It will be a thing strange for you to hear,' the leader said. 'We are righteous men who have a right to reach the holy mountain for our faith has made us wonderfully holy. The giants will allow none to proceed to the foot of the mountain. They find they must not only prevent us, but they suck our blood, as though by righteous blood they will become righteous.'

Balwone felt his heart sicken within him. His first impulse was to promise them he would destroy the giants and set them free to continue their pilgrimage.

'Is it yon golden egg of love you desire to see,' he asked, 'or is it that you simply desire to arrive there?'

'To arrive there!' they chorused.

'Then you do not well,' Balwone said. 'You are but sightseers, and so the giants have blinded you, for they will have none look upon that egg of love lest you be changed. You err in that you think of yourselves as righteous when your hearts are no better than those of the giants. You are the human creatures made to reflect the Most High; yet you reflect but yourselves as though you were righteous ones in yourselves.'

A great murmuring broke out amongst the wall of dehumanised men. Their murmur grew to a protest, but they lacked the strength even to be angry on their own account. Some of them moaned pitifully.

'Your sorrow is that your hearts are unmasked,' Balwone said. 'I wager that when the giants suck away your righteousness so that theirs may be enlarged, you die from the action.'

'We die!' they agreed. 'We dread the giants living upon us, though they feed our mouths well.'

'It is as I thought,' said the knight. 'Those who oppose the Most High must demean him by flaunting their own righteousness and, since they have none by nature, they draw upon the images of the Most High to deprive them of such right-eousness.'

'That they do!' they all cried in one voice.

'Truly they do,' said Balwone, 'but since you have no true righteousness they feed upon your self-righteousness, and this is what they desire, even beyond the pure righteousness of the Most High. There is, then, one way of escape for each of you—for all of you.'

'There is no way of escape,' said the leader sadly but firmly. 'We have failed to reach the holy mountain and so we are permitted to live only by their bidding and pleasure.'

'Nay!' cried Balwone. 'There is a way you may take, but it will be the way of pain to you. You must die in order to live, and then you shall truly live and no giant will be able to gainsay you or prevent you from returning to your fellow human crea-tures.'

'Tell us this way,' they pleaded.

'You must renounce your righteousness,' said the knight. 'You must let it be drawn from you or you must vomit it from your bodies, your minds, your souls and your spirits. You must become bereft of such righteousness, since no man of himself, and no woman of herself, possesses such. You have made yourselves vulnerable to these righteous-eating vultures.'

Those who had been barely vocal now gained strength enough to have anger and wrath, and their expressionless faces became distorted with anger and malignant wrath.

'Back in our kingdoms we attained to true righteousness by many good deeds, by much study and by following the ways of the ancient wisdom. That alone qualified us to be pilgrims, and that we will never surrender.'

'On pain of death you must surrender,' said Balwone.

'Who are you?' barked out one, as a dog makes its angry challenge.

'I am the servant of Massia,' said Balwone. 'I am bid to the holy mountain.'

'Then,' barked another, 'you would have your pilgrimage alone and, like the giants, you would not let us go also.'

'You must return to your kith and kin,' said Balwone. 'You must die in the dust here in order that you may live with true joy there.'

There were cries of amazement and longing, though with them the fierce protests continued.

'You will die now,' said Balwone, 'will go now, and nothing will stop you any more than it stopped the hairy men.'

'The hairy men!' someone cried in astonishment. 'Are they then free of this place?'

'They are free of this place,' said Balwone. 'None could prevent them finding liberty.'

'I, for one,' said the leader, 'would do as you bid us.'

There were other cries of 'I', 'and I', 'and I'.

'Then die here,' said Balwone. 'Renounce your self-righteousness and become as those who have none. This is the first step in your liberty.'

'And then?' they asked.

'That will be shown you,' said the knight; 'but tarry not before the dragon comes and again deceives you.'

Suddenly there was a groaning and moaning, a crying and a wailing, a shrieking and a sad sobbing as many fell to the earth in their passion. Others were horrified by the sight and made move-ment as though they would flee. Balwone cried warning and encouragement to them.

'Do not flee,' he said, 'or the self-righteousness of which you are proud even in your captivity will make food of you for the hungry giants that dwell in all us human creatures, sucking our life from us.'

Out of the terrible melee rose some of the penitents, and their arms were upraised in great joy, their faces shone and their blindness had gone. They bade their fellow creatures to do as they had done—to be drained of self-righteousness and be so wonderfully liberated.

Some of the others did as they had been bidden and they fell with the same cries and moanings and, after a season, they rose with joy.

Others were appalled at Balwone's words. 'It is the deceit of the Undeceiver!' they cried. 'This knight before us is but another manifestation of deceit. We must never surrender our righteous-ness.'

With such statements they stood before the liberated brethren and covered their faces so as not to see.

'Self-righteousness dies hard,' said Balwone. 'It is woven in to the very fibres of our being, but desist from it and be free. Then shall you return to your loved ones.'

Some were persuaded by this exhortation, by the witness of their transformed friends, but others stopped their ears and crept away into the depths of the jungle. Their old friends, despite their new found joy, had sorrow in their hearts as they watched them go.

'Is there nought we can do?' they asked Balwone pitifully. 'Nought,' said the knight. 'Leave them be. It maybe they will remember the joy of your liberty and fall to the earth wherever they are and so find a way of escape from this sad jungle. Pride brought them here and may yet make them the food of deceptive giants.'

He turned to the group that still trembled in its joy. 'Go your way,' he said, 'and if you meet giants or dragons, tarry not to battle with them. They will arise even from your own hearts to confront you, but you must see them as men who do not see them. Be careful never to have battle with them for then you will give them substance.'

'Without doubt your words are wise,' said the leader, 'though we understand them not. Perhaps understanding will come better in the doing of them.'

He bowed to the earth before Balwone. 'Great servant of Massia,' he said, 'we do homage to your master through you. It fills our hearts to be done with this pilgrimage and to return to our families, the ones we love. They will find us not at all strange as we once were in the delusion of our self-right-eousness.'

There was a joyous chorus of agreement and the others fell at Balwone's feet. Then they rose, embraced him, kissed Ballia time and again and moved as a joyful singing group towards

their exit from the jungle-forest, and one of the songs they sang was:

*We are the freed ones,  
Free from our blindness,  
Free from the monsters  
That kept us full bound.  
We are the pilgrims  
Who made ourselves holy,  
Righteous and splendid  
To tread holy ground.*

*Once in delusion  
Sought we the mountain,  
Sought we the high love,  
Sought as our right.  
Righteous and holy  
Though sinful, unholy,  
Gave to the giants  
Food for their life.*

*Creatures of darkness  
They fed on our ideals,  
Fostered our life  
To keep them from death.  
Now they have nought,  
We give to them nothing.  
Now they are bound  
To die their own death.*

*March we on singing,  
Glad we are humbled.  
Praises we give to him  
Who is Most High.  
Soon we'll be family  
Living so joyous,  
Freed from our bondage  
From which we fly.*

*Nothing within us  
And nothing around us  
Can hold us as captives  
Since we are the free.  
Praise to the wonder  
Of him who created,  
Praise be forever  
For liberty.*

Ballia, the most noble and dignified of all horses, gave such a run and a skip that the knight was almost unseated, riding as he was, bareback, but he too had a skipping and a leaping in his heart. At the same time he had a sorrow for the others—those who had melted like grey wraiths into the dark jungle—for he knew, with sorrow, that mankind is slow to relinquish the pride that is as life to the human heart.

Finally he accepted the fact of their self-righteousness, knowing he, too, was always facing that giant of The Accuser who never accused without there being some grain of truth in his sayings. Ballia, beneath him, was now walking sedately, and both were sobered for the difficulties that lay ahead of them. They knew they would not be as easily deceived.

Balwone wondered whether the encounter with the last giant had left any dangerous impressions on his soul, but since he could not know, and since the sword had disappeared from his side, he fell to ruminating on the wisdom he had learned from Flamgrid and his manuscripts, and from his wise father and mother, Facius and Merphein. He was also moved to remember the gentleness and simplicity of Merom and the peace-loving Gothic. It was perhaps the memory of her which stirred him more than all of his other thoughts.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### On towards the Mountain

THAT night a great storm took place, the like of which man and horse had never before witnessed. Although they had mainly made themselves warm and comfortable in a covert of thick trees and undergrowth, they were not wholly protected. Indeed, every moment they seemed in fear of their lives. Thunder and lightning there were aplenty, but the harsh crashing and smashing of the thunder, and brilliant blues and whites of the lightning bolts, were such as never before had been heard or seen. They must have struck terror into all the denizens of the Allein jungle whether natural or supernatural. Lightning set parts of the forest ablaze, and many an ancient forest-giant was uprooted, crashing down and bringing others with it.

Ballia remained calm and so did Balwone. What was happening was in some way unreal. It seemed to them to be the anger of the great dragon, venting its spite and spleen on giants who had failed and pilgrims who had escaped back into the security of warm human living. The one who was high on the mountain nurturing the golden egg of love saw the horrific happenings below and knew the time of the special visitation was near.

By this time Balwone was tutored enough to know that the jungle was really that of created things which had gone far from the rule of the Most High. It was true enough that trees and animal creatures, flora and fauna, were not of themselves wrong or evil, but evil creatures—making a kingdom other than the authentic one of the Most High—had so twisted and perverted what was by nature beautiful and pure that they had brought confusion to the kingdoms of men, beasts, creatures of the air and water, and trees and plants, so that they seemed to be the creations

of the Most High which now portrayed him as faulty and even evil.

More even than this, Balwone was tutored to know that such violent storms can be the expressions not of the Most High, nor primarily of the dragon, but of the hearts of human beings. No storms are as terrible as those which take place in such hearts. That is why Ballia and the knight stayed in their covert, not greatly fearing the rage that was lashing about them. Some kind of grace calmed their hearts and, since faith comes from grace, they stayed calm, awaiting the outcome, however terrible it might be.

\* \* \*

The outcome was a calm dawn. True, fires still burned here and there and fallen trees were a shambles, so much so that Balwone wondered whether it had not been a visitation of judgment for he was learning that the Most High is not static like the idols, but that he ever moves in the affairs of his creation, ever judging, ever healing, ever destroying, ever renewing.

Calm, then, was the dawn, and with it openings to the shell-pink sky where the trees had fallen. Suffused with the rose light, the dawn flushed up and came quietly to them. They marvelled at the peace and knew they were about to emerge from the iron-hardness and bitter harshness of the Allein country.

That is, until they saw the great dragon rearing heavenwards, its head higher and larger than hitherto. Never had its sulphurous fumes been so strong and stinking, its eyes so filled with murderous rage. Now it was turning its head so that its seeing ranged over all the universe. Its high cry trumpeted out as it lifted clawed hands and swayed from side to side, all the while its great legs and feet thumping the ground about it. It was as though all nature shuddered and was dismayed. The giant trees shook at the moorings of their roots, and the beauty of the dawn paled to a deathly grey. It seemed that the sun hesitated to pursue its rounds, and a gloom settled over Allein and even the holy mountain that previously had glowed with the joy of the calm dawn.

The eyes of the creature flashed towards Balwone and Ballia where they had emerged from their covert. For some ten minutes the white stallion had frolicked, then lain down upon its back, rolling from side to side, kicking its legs with abandonment, and then joyfully heaving itself to its feet. All of this in sight of the enraged beast—as though that creature mattered not. Balwone had also stretched his limbs, tensing them one by one, relaxing them one by one, and running his hands through his hair with the sheer joy of living.

To the dragon this disregard of him and his frightful visage was a form of insult, an obscenity not to be pardoned, and his stamping was like the thunder of many giants, and all creatures trembled. Then the tirade began.

‘You there! You miserable parody of a sage and a prophet! You who would ascend the holy mountain as though you were a god such as I am! Do you think you will be permitted to place defiled feet on such sacred soil, upon the mountain that is mine by right? Do you have holiness, righteousness, truth and goodness that flows through your being as blood through your body? No! No! No! You have nothing but your petty pride and your trick stallion.

‘I will show you what happens to men like you whose pride is so inflated and without substance. I will show you the devastation that such bring upon themselves. Look, then, and see what the centuries have brought to such proud creatures, crazed with ambition and refusing the true lord of this earth.’

With that the dragon beat his mighty breast with his clawed fists, and the sound of it rolled across the wastes of Allein and reached even to the mountain now before them. Again, all things trembled, and a mist blew like hot steam, and the sight of all things failed as the man and his horse peered to see the vision the beast would bring to them.

The mist cleared. The heat turned to bitter cold, and there before the two watchers was a vast and desolate field, a plain of desolation and a place of horror. Fight it as he would, Balwone was sickened by the sight of a vista of corpses, eyes dead but staring, bodies spread-eagled and awry, lying in layers one upon the other, some frozen in the last horrific gestures of their terrible

dying. In that long plain that had opened before the holy mountain were the dead victims of the dreadful dragon.

The great serpentine beast had a sneering sarcasm in its eyes and upon its face, and it snarled down its contempt where the horse and the man stood.

‘These are the many who would have made their way to the mountain and the Most High. They called themselves his pilgrims and his servants. See, then, their pitiful end and their foolish failure! Had they come unto me, and had they worked with me, they would now be great creatures of power and everlasting triumph. As it is, their stench reaches to the nostrils of your Most High and his vaunted Massia, but there is nought they can do about it. I have triumphed.’

Such a bellow came from him, and so evil was it, that the knight gagged with the retching that came suddenly upon him, and his whole being was filled with a loathing such as he had not previously known.

Ballia’s stare was that of a creature transfixed, but as the stench of the dead reached his nostrils he rose on his hind legs and flung his forelegs upwards and neighed with such fervour and thunder that for a moment the dragon paused from its own shrieking vituperations. It may even have been that fear came into the eyes for Ballia kept repeating the performance of his anger at the evil of history.

Balwone became as one with his equine companion. He felt at his side and the presence of the sword was a comfort. His features grew stern and his heart stout, and he found a thunder for his voice that had no precedent in his generally gentle life. He—as Ballia—was roused against the ancient dragon and its pitiless massacre.

‘Foul and vile monster that you are!’ he cried. ‘You have done evil with the creatures of the Most High, and dreadful and painful will be your doom. Yet nothing will prevent the will of the Most High from reaching its fulfilment. I reject the lie of this vision and I tell you the truth of the truth.’

With that he lifted his sword and swung it in an arc and pointed it towards the sea of the dead, the carnage of evil’s history, and he cried, ‘These shall rise. They shall rise from their

death and they shall be resplendent in their new glory for they are the people of love and of faith, and the Most High will visit them, and Massia will bring them to that life which is filled with splendour and has no end!’

‘Foul blasphemy!’ screeched the beast in return. ‘What has the Most High done for them down through the ages as they have suffered? He has done nought that could keep them from death. Foolishly they believed in him and vainly they followed him, all the time expecting good from his hands but receiving nothing but miserable death.’

Laughter that sounded like that from a sepulchre—the vast mausoleum of dead history—came in waves across Allein and out to the ends of the earth and the limits of the sky as the evil creatures throbbed out their foul and mirthless humour.

Still Balwone held his sword high, and even from its tip came a golden light that flashed towards the bodies. In the beginning it was a pinpoint of brilliance, but its glow widened so that its scope was as broad as the scene before them. So vast and all-embracing was it that no corpse—hitherto transfixed in writhing horror—was not illuminated. This supernal light was flooded upon them all and, as it reached the scene of that dreadful carnage, the dead relaxed from the pain of their death. The contorted faces became peaceful and the warm glow of a new life suffused all who had been slain.

In a gentle movement—at which man and horse sighed—the renewal from horrific death took place. Bodies rose in wholeness, and the holiness of them was as a shining light, clothing the late nakedness and moulding them into beings of beauty, new creations in splendour. Their eyes shone with the joy of transformation and their arms were lifted towards the unseen Most High, and they began a song that so moved the man watching them that tears poured from his heart and eyes and coursed down his cheeks. Ballia stood motionless, neck arched and head bowed, as though he were paying homage. The marvellous music of the martyrs thrilled and throbbed, and even—if only for a moment—the monstrous dragon stared with awe and terror, his hideous laughter stilled and his scorching scorn frozen.

Then his body started into action. His arms weaved, his head was lifted to a new height and he trumpeted abuse at the action of the slender sword.

‘It is but an illusion!’ he screamed. ‘It is a trick of the crazed mind of one maddened by pride! These dead are dead and the sword speaks fantasy. Death can know no reverse for death is forever.’

Balwone stood wondering at the great power of the sword, and it was then the truth and meaning of that weapon burned into his mind. This was no sword he held in his hand—as men count weapons—but it was the very word of the Most High. What he would say, none could gainsay—be that one the dragon himself, some powerful giant, some fallen celestial creature with supernatural power or be it the most brilliant of all terrestrials. He thrilled to know the sword was proof against the most deadly of enemies; yet he trembled also to know it was within his own hand.

Where a few moments before the hideous rolling of dragonish laughter had thundered through the air, the joy of a man who has seen truth at its most triumphant point of pure power now pealed through the heavens. It split the bitter vituperation of the fire-breathing monster and shattered its brutish power. Such moments may be few in the lives of the holy knights, but when they come then all evil is defeated before them. In vain did the destroyer rant and rave, for its sounds were made to be empty of meaning and void of conviction. Finally, even its own rage was spent, and all it could do was glare its fierce hatred from eyes whose menace was impotent. It was perforce inarticulate before the rollicking merriment of a human’s faith.

‘This is the beast’s last great attempt to stop me,’ said a voice within Balwone’s mind. It needed none to tell him that the late scene of carnage was an illusion the dragon had conjured up before him—an insubstantial chimera of horror. It had no reality. What then of the glory of the raising of the holy dead—was that also an illusion—a non-happening? ‘Nay,’ said the inner voice, ‘the holy dead seem only as dead. Theirs will be a true resurrection, and such singing and music will be their new utterance given for joy of seeing the Most High.’

He listened to the voice and was contented. In that moment the dragon faded and its voice was no more. The risen dead were also gone, and all things visionary had vanished from his sight. When he looked back at the jungle nothing had changed. It was as high and harsh as ever, as silent and foreboding as it had been, but when he turned to the east the high mountain before him was now crystal clear in the calm silence of this strange and wonder-ful dawn.

It became obvious to him that in his many travels he had seen no mountain so high as this holy one. He was now free of the jungle-forest and was able to view the high peak that was almost lost in the heavens. As he stared with wondering eyes he could discern the form of a figure seated—so he believed—upon the golden egg of love of which the mystics had spoken and of which the prophets and sages had dreamed. His heart was strangely moved and he could scarcely bear its palpitations of joy. Soon he would have ascended, and the mystery of history would be revealed to him.

\* \* \*

He turned to Ballia, and as he did his heart almost stopped. The horse was looking at him with sorrowful eyes. In that sorrow he detected something of love that was not merely equine. Ballia was tapping the earth with his front right hoof and his head was nodding up and down. He turned his head expressively towards the tall jungle behind them and then nodded in its direction. The painful truth broke upon the knight: Ballia must return. This had been told him by Flamgrid, and the same sorrow and love came to Balwone. He came to his companion of past battle and embraced him about the neck. For his part, Ballia kept nodding and then began to nuzzle the rider he had come to love.

When the moment of parting came, the white stallion turned and began moving towards the forest. At first its nose almost trailed in the dust of the earth and the bladed grass, but after a time it lifted its head proudly and all its being shone in white splendour. As it raced it neighed, and as it neighed it raced, and suddenly it had entered into the forest and was lost to the sight of Balwone the Great.

He—for his part—stared with sorrow for the loss of his companion. His mind was filled with the memories of their former companionship. Now he was alone—alone in the wide, silent dawn—and no creature or other of human form was there to comfort him.

Finally he turned and began walking towards the high and holy mountain.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### On the Mountain

AS BALWONE proceeded towards the mountain, he became aware of hunger and thirst. He expected that the trees and vines of different foliage which were now before him would be a source of nourishing fruit and nuts, and that soon proved to be the case. What caught his eye most was a vine with golden balls of an unknown fruit, and when he peeled the skin of one and ate of it he felt strengthened. He was sure he could go on in the nourishment of it for many days. He stared with no little wonder at the variety of edible things including all manner of nuts.

He came to a stream with clear water—chuckling its way along—beside which grew trees in profusion. At first it appeared as does any forest stream. He then looked back and it seemed the iron-grey jungle had disappeared, and in its place was territory of exceeding beauty—vast plains that were materially real yet of such shining glory, pastures of translucent green, glowing as do amethysts. Through these gentle fields the stream flowed, ever widening, so that in the distance it seemed to have become a great river. His eyes then looked upwards and he saw that the stream had its source and origin in the head of the mountain, and that it was cascading down with evident joy. Even so, at this point where he had met it, it was little more than a creek. Since he needed to quench his thirst he knelt at a convenient point where there was little foliage of trees to prevent him and he began to drink.

Whether in his mind or audibly uttered into the air, a song was suddenly there, and it appeared to him that he knew the tune as from some time of old. Thirst quenched, he rose and made his way along a narrow track and found himself singing this song whose words were new to him; yet it seemed he had always known the truth of them:

*Pilgrim, take your fill of water  
From the holy stream that goes,  
For it riseth in the mountains  
And into your heart it flows.*

*It is life that first is given  
To the thirsty from Most High:  
Life that is his life now spilling  
That we mortals may not die.*

*Life is love, that love that liveth  
As the Being—the Most High.  
Love commenced and love continued  
Is your immortality.*

*Life is love that ever giveth,  
Taketh not nor reasons why—  
Why it gives in simple manners—  
Even if it death must die.*

*All around us love is needed,  
Many ask, yet fewer give:  
Give and find the life of giving  
Is the pure life of love.*

*Drink then, pilgrim, drink most fully,  
Where life's in you there's love.  
Drink until it fill you wholly  
Fitting you for love above.*

*Life above and life around us—  
These are one in love that's here.  
Pilgrim drink, ascend your mountain,  
Love casts out all human fear.*

*If your heart is pure, oh pilgrim,  
You will find the source of life.  
If not, then deep pain will visit  
Bringing you a deadly strife.  
Even so, drink of this water.*

*Even so, you need its power.  
It alone can lead and guide you  
To the full predestined hour.*

Having sung his joy, he looked back to see the flowing of that water through amethyst meadows but the vision had changed. Again there was the iron-grey forest, and the tall tree-giants blotted out what meadows may have been back of and beyond it. Ahead, the mountain now seemed to take on a severe look, as though it saw him as a stranger and would prevent access and passage. Nevertheless the song was in his mind and he kept singing it and living in the promise of it. The last two verses kept repeating themselves in his mind, and a line of faint uneasiness began to build up in his spirit, though why he knew not. Perhaps the words 'pain' and 'deadly strife' were the cause.

\* \* \*

Now he was entering the forest of the mountain and, although its growth was intense, it was not dark within as had been the Allein country. Often the sun would break through and dapple the trees and grass and the path on which he was treading. He observed that fruits and nuts were plentiful and that butterflies and other insects of great beauty and brilliant hues abounded. He could not feel evil in the air, and to him this was wonderful compensation for his mind kept dwelling on Roget and Ballia and Morna, and he was missing them sorely.

He purposefully kept his mind on the sacred Writings, and what things were written on his memory he loved dearly, for it seemed to him that such ideas and wisdom could alone sustain him in his pilgrimage. He regretted not having committed more thoughts of the sages and prophecies to memory, but those he had encouraged him to press on.

He found within him a growing excitement as he climbed the holy mountain, and it was an excitement which greatly stimulated him, whilst at the same time it puzzled his mind. It had mainly to do with the fact that he had been chosen as the servant of Massia,

that he—alone, it seemed—was the one chosen to climb the mountain. In all history his life was unique. So he would humbly ponder the loving parentage which had brought him into the world and trained him. He felt the excitement enlarge when he contemplated the nature of Flamgrid, the wise cobbler, and the events which had issued from being trained by such a master. He also thought deeply about the women in his life and the mystery of their femininity—the intuitive wisdom which had been theirs above the wisdom he had gained by much effort and many days and nights of sleeplessness.

He knew that there had been men and women in history who had been raised above others to be wise, prophetic and loving, but there was an amazement in his own spirit that, somehow, he had been elected beyond even them for this task that now lay so close at hand—the opening of the egg of love. He trembled violently as he thought of it, and had to pause and rest against a tree until the fever of shaking, and the intense trembling of joy and wonder, had somewhat abated.

Then he journeyed on, but by now the silence, the loss of companions and the mighty event he was anticipating caused him to converse with himself. If the Most High were with him, then it was in utter silence, and if he were speaking to Balwone then what he said was unheard by the knight. Somehow his thoughts fluttered as large and beautiful as the brilliant-hued creatures about him—the butterflies, insects and birds. As the latter of these flew and swooped and flitted, winging their ways through flowered groves, so his thoughts became as them, and the variety and multiplicity of them matched the profusion of rich life about him. He felt the need to draw them all together in some form of coherent thinking and so he began what he deemed to be a holy soliloquy.

‘Master knight,’ he said, addressing himself. ‘Balwone, son of Facius and Merphein, as also pupil of the wise cobbler, Flamgrid. You are on a pilgrimage unique in the annals of the human race, and most necessary for its healing. You, though but a man as others, a human creature as are all of this one race, you—of all—have been called to a great destiny, and this you must fulfil.

‘You have been taken through a life of learning. You have had to forfeit human fame and human success. You have even had to set aside a kingdom or kingdoms that may have come to you had you loved the plaudits of men and coveted power over them. Your trained gallantry and chivalry could have made you the darling of many, even whilst making you envied by others.

‘Comfort you have often forfeited because your pilgrimage demanded you should visit the haunts of depraved and defeated human beings. You have witnessed the greed, cruelty and savagery of those who would dominate their fellow creatures and demean them even to the dust. You have pondered the matter of human evil and of human nobility, and made your way through the fastnesses and thickets of wise thinking and emerged with the reality of wisdom inherited from the sages and the prophets who have trod such ways before you.

‘You have been called upon to forsake the hardness of heart that humans often have with one another, for in the plight of man there is a call for pity, and compassion, mercy and understanding. You—perhaps most of all men—have been permitted to see that the only healing of the tragedy of the creation of the Most High is by love. It is love alone which will save this world.

‘Such love must unhand us all. It must begin at the highest levels of monarchy and government, at the places where nobility is the responsibility of those born to ruling and riches and wisdom, and it must reach down to the mildest and humblest of all creatures. It must reach even deeper to where the human spirit has been horribly degraded, and the image of the Most High—who made all—should be renewed to its pristine beauty, majesty and holiness.

‘For such visitation of love, the Most High has set an egg of pure love, a golden egg of unsullied love, upon his holy mountain, and one must reach it and one must so nourish it and await its predestined hour, that it shall open and love shall come to all men. This is written in the ancient, sacred and sapient Writings. It is written—yes—it is written!’

Now he was trembling afresh with great wonder and joy, and the tears were flowing from his eyes and cascading down his doublet and falling even to his feet, and for the time they blinded

him. Yet he did not blunder on his way, but kept his head high, and so continued his soliloquy.

‘It is not for nothing,’ he told himself, ‘that they call me Balwone the Great. For this greatness I was born and for its fullness I was called. In the mystery of our race I have been given a destiny beyond all others excepting only Massia himself.’

As he said these words the colloquy with himself ceased and his mind began brooding on Massia, for whenever he had thought of Massia this one seemed yet so far away. He wondered how he could be the servant of Massia when Massia was the servant of the Most High, and if he—Balwone—were to bring love to the world and renew it to its primal peace, and its ultimate tranquillity and unity of being, then what was there left for Massia to do?

His own thoughts troubled him deeply for it was as though he had some anguish of spirit when he had to acknowledge Massia as the great one, great even above himself. Often when Flamgrid adulated Massia he had felt a tinge of feeling which he dared not call jealousy but which was certainly somewhat like such envy. At such times he would banish the thought of Massia from his mind, and his spirit would grow easier and he could turn again to the destiny which was undoubtedly his own and leave Massia’s destiny to that person himself.

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As he travelled his hand would often wander to the side where the golden sword and its sheath would be, but he travelled without weapons, and from this he assumed no dangers were assailing him—not even unseen creatures who desired to prevent him from arriving at his holy goal.

His body grew tired from time to time, and he would lower himself and lean against a tree, seeking to gather strength. On other occasions he would drink from the stream, and its water seemed to refresh him. Certain fruits became favourites of his and he would consume them with delight. When weakness seemed to overpower him he would sit and lean against a great forest-giant of a tree and fall into dreamless sleep.

Nothing in all that mountain disturbed his spirit—nothing, that is, except the excitement and the growing, surging joy of anticipation. At such times it would seem he was in fevers that rose to their crises and then abated, and he would be left weak. Only when he drank and ate food would he recover, and it seemed necessary for him on these occasions to soliloquise and reiterate to himself his high and holy calling, his noble destiny and the necessity to complete his pilgrimage for the liberation of the creation and its creatures which were presently caught in the bond-age of evil and selfishness.

Sometimes he would summon up out of his memory the keen gaze of Flamgrid, his wise mentor, or the glowing eyes of Merom, the beloved. He would wish for the wise and generous praise in the eyes of Facius, his father, and the noble and beautiful glances of Gothlic, the daughter of Gothroyd. Then there would be times when he longed for the honest servanthip of Roget or the devotion of the imperious white stallion, Ballia, or the companionship of Morna—so lonely was the knight in the pleasant places of the sacred mountain.

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Then came the wonderful hour when he burst forth from the forest-growth of the holy hill and espied high above him, but yet close to him, the peak of the mountain. Lofty it was indeed, but the air was so rare and pure that sight was easy and he could see seated upon a golden egg the figure of man.

He found his joy was full, and such as to set him trembling again, but the sight of the man troubled him deeply. He thought this must surely be Massia of whom he was to be servant. Was it in this way he was to be servant? Was Balwone the Great to be humbled as a simple servant in the cause of all-embracing love and the destiny of Massia himself?

He could not understand the conflict within his spirit. He dared not admit to jealousy and rage, but then why this tumult, this raging storm within his breast? If his destiny was soon to be fulfilled, why should another be there nourishing the gleaming egg? Once, he thought this man might be a servant to him, one

who—like Flamgrid—was of humble origins but was yet set to serve him—Balwone.

That thought encouraged him, and then, because the matter had to be decided, he found himself climbing the peak, though it was so sheer in its height and even dangerous to ascend. Yet he was surefooted in his climbing and it seemed that enormous energy came to him—strength beyond any strength he had ever known.

As he climbed, the sweat began to pour from him. Its salty pearls slipped into his eyes and affected his vision so that he saw things as in a mist. His muscles ached with the constant demands made upon them by the holy joy and ecstasy within him. His mind left the matter of the other man to be comprehended when his goal would be reached. All his powers and energies must be applied to this last burst of climbing.

Applied they were; aching in every part of his body, his lungs almost bursting with the rarity and purity of the air of that cold height, he yet pressed on and, as he did, the golden glory of the divine egg flashed out like the warning and welcome that some beacon might give to a persistent mariner.

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There, unbelievably but truly, he had scaled that sheer ascent and was standing on firm ground before the other man and the egg on which he was seated, and the pilgrimage of the years was at its final point of fulfilment.

Tremendous joy swept over the knight, and he fell before the egg, and his heart was near to bursting as he cried out from the depths of his being:

O great and wonderful love! O glorious golden love! O love that will heal us all and make us one! O love that has ever beckoned and called! Here am I, Balwone the Great—your servant forever! Your true and destined love! Great, great love! O how I love you.

It seemed to him then that he saw the whole world in all its glory, its nobility and yet in its evil and degradation. Faces of

anger, despair, hatred, envy and pride all were before him, as were also the wretched, the starving, the dying and the dead. Other faces, with eyes filled with love, serenity, nobility, purity and peace, also looked at him out of the myriad of human creatures—good and evil.

He realised afresh in that moment that it was for such a splendid hour he had come, and that as Balwone the Great he would liberate the world from its mixture of good and evil, its hatred and its love, its power and its weakness, and bring to pass the glory of a unified humanity.

So he stood gazing at the great golden egg and the man who sat upon it. His eyes were almost blinded by the dazzling glory, but his heart was repeating his address to the golden egg of love:

O great and wonderful love! O glorious golden love! O love that will heal us all and make us one! O love that has ever beckoned and called! Here am I, Balwone the Great—your servant forever! Your true and destined love! Great, great love! O how I love you.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

## So Much Failure of Joy

SO OVERCOME was he by the sight of the egg and the anticipated destiny both of himself and the world, that the knight sank to his knees, and then prostrated himself before the hope of mankind. In his prostration thousands of days of pilgrimage seemed to take their toll and he fell into a deep sleep. His heart and his lips still moved with the words of his ascription for he murmured them passionately over and again:

O great and wonderful love! O glorious golden love! O love that will heal us all and make us one! O love that has ever beckoned and called! Here am I, Balwone the Great—your servant forever! Your true and destined love! Great, great love! O how I love you.

The utterance of them, however, was attended by some deep grief within him and he found the words dying on his lips, and in their place came a flood of utterances which bewildered him. It was then that he knew how deep is the heart of a human being and how much it stores from thoughts deliberate and thoughts vagrant, from observations of other people, of places and situations, from events and happenings of all kinds. It was as though he had been himself and yet not himself. It was as though he had been another than the being whose aim and ambition was to reach this height beyond all heights and to reach the golden goal of the egg. What he thought and felt dismayed him. Dark nights and empty days all rose up against him and enveloped him, and he cried for the agony and the emptiness, the blankness and the vacuity of them.

He was aware that all about him was a silence he had not hitherto known, and this silence was being watched by a gallery of

utterly mute observers. This quiet audience was nevertheless communicating to him by the glances its members were giving, the messages of their eyes being eloquent. The knowledge of who they were and their looking upon him brought wonder to his spirit. Unbelievably the dragons were there—the large one and its covey of smaller ones, the giants he had seen and giants hitherto unseen—they were all there, and all were passive and silent.

Mute also, but as eloquent with their looks of sorrow and pity, were the ones he had loved—Facijs and Merphein, Flamgrid and Roget, Gothlic and Merom. He would have thought their eyes would have blazed with approval and admiration, with encouragement and love, but these things were absent. There was just that depthless sorrow and the yearning of a compassion that was also stern in its warning to him.

It seemed to him that the ones who had always seemed evil to him—the dragons and the giants—were not opposing him, and yet not urging him on. They were immovable in their silence, as though they had both disapproval and fears, whilst his friends were apprehensive and yet conscious of what he would most surely do—move out to take over the golden egg, thus fulfilling his destiny.

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Into that silence broke a voice, the Voice that had been with him in the days of his lodging with Flamgrid and which had often come to him in travels. He wondered that the Voice had been silent so long, but now it refused to be mute, and he heard its words; gentle, strong and clear.

‘O Balwone, turn back whilst there is time. Do not do battle with the man yonder whom your heart hates. Turn at this last moment from your seeming destiny to find a better. Do not disturb the one who guards the golden treasure of love. Hear my bidding and begone.’

He heard these words with great dismay and immediately remembered the voice of the beautiful lady, the one who was indeed a siren, drawing him from his path of duty and weakening his knightly resolve, and he believed this Voice was not *the*

Voice, but another, and one which would divert him from his true duty. He would have cried out against the Voice but it held him dumb, and he was not able to gainsay it.

More than ever he was troubled by his enemies and his friends, especially as they seemed one in their opposition to his endeavour when he would have expected his close friends to approve and to encourage him. A dreadful despair seized him and, in order to defeat it, he kept uttering the address he had given so recently:

O great and wonderful love! O glorious golden love! O love that will heal us all and make us one! O love that has ever beckoned and called! Here am I, Balwone the Great—your servant forever! Your true and destined love! Great, great love! O how I love you.

In vain did his cry repeat itself, for there was no applause from the gallery of his watchers. Their unwavering gaze fright-ened him, and he battled with their non-approval. Something within him welled up—an anger and a protest of sorts—and he shook himself from his trance and was again seeing the golden egg before him and the man who sat upon it. The force and power of long-present ambition returned and he rose to his feet and rushed towards the man who sat upon the golden object.

As he ran he unsheathed his sword and flourished it in the high air of the mountain-peak. Its slim golden blade gleamed and flashed as he pointed it heavenwards, and he gloried in the power and purpose of it. There was with it an almost heady recognition within him that his intentions were justified. He felt as good men feel when their destiny is about to be fulfilled. It came to him also that if the sword were there, then it was there to destroy evil, and so anything which now opposed him must be evil, and of that there could be no doubt. In that moment the effects of the trance died and the silent audience vanished. He was alone in his action, alone in his decision, and something within him trembled at the choice which was his. As far back as he could remember he had been within a community of like-minded people, those who considered his calling a high and noble one and who urged him on to the completion of his

destiny. Now, it would seem, he was left to himself, and of himself must decide his action.

Of course, in this case the audience had been an illusion, something perhaps dredged up by himself to confirm him and to applaud the action he might undertake. Thus he fortified himself, and so was greatly strengthened by his own decision—firstly by, and in, the act of his resolve and then secondly in the movement of his consequent action. So he rushed upon the man who was keeping the egg. Such rage was in his own eyes that he could not rightly see the person before him, but then he did not wish to do so. The silence of that man and the nobility of his appearance threatened to halt him in his resolve, but too much was at stake to draw back from his inner resolve.

He cried, 'Greetings to you who sit upon the egg! Greetings from Balwone the Great, who has come to relieve you of your present ministry in order that the hour of its true destiny may be fulfilled.' Even as he said the word he wondered whether in truth it was the destiny of the egg he desired to fulfil or his own destiny in relation to the egg, but such matters were past meditating. It was action which was now called for.

The other seemed scarcely to hear. He did not lift his eyes. He gazed not upon Balwone but kept his eyes fixed contemplatively upon the great egg on which he was seated. His was a firm serenity, a tranquillity which spoke of assurance in his vocation. Nothing of the rushing knight stirred a response—or a reaction—within him.

It was then—though only for a moment—that Balwone hesitated in his purpose. Something of the nobility and regality of the other one so affected him that it threatened to silence his cries and nullify his endeavour. For that reason he raised his voice the second time, and there was a hastiness in his spirit.

'I come to do what I must do—to ask you to vacate your place and give it over to me.'

Again the other one was silent and, instead of conversing with him as great men do with one another, Balwone gave over to the rising indignation within him—the anger at being opposed in his most holy call. His voice was urgent, but also it was high, harsh and imperious.

‘Unseat yourself, I pray you,’ he said. He endeavoured to keep his voice calm and dignified—filled with lofty assurance and authoritative insistence—but it was a strong tide that was rising. It was the indignation powerful persons know when they are opposed by others—or another—in what they believe to be their true destiny.

So he cried, ‘For this hour have I come, and in this hour I purpose to do that which has been planned for me by the Most High, and so is according to the wisdom of the sages and the prophets. Thus I command you, “Unseat! Vacate! Give way to Balwone the Great!”’

His voice went ringing through that holy place, and it had no echo. It was taken up and absorbed in the silence that covered all. Still the silent figure did not speak. Nor did he move from his occupation of guarding and nourishing the golden egg beneath him.

Balwone again flourished his sword, and its slim, glittering blade flashed with a colour no less golden than the egg. There was living power in that flourish and it emboldened the knight.

‘For this hour I have come!’ he cried. ‘This is my destiny; this it was for which I was born!’

His voice sounded full to him, but it seemed almost to be lost in this sanctuary of the golden egg. It woke no responsive echo. The man upon the gilded object lifted his gaze to Balwone, and Balwone shuddered as those other eyes met his. Somewhere, sometime, but perhaps not in this lifetime, he had seen that person, and the sight of him brought a deep dread. The serenity of the man was no less than he had seen in the bearing of the ones he had loved, but perhaps it even exceeded theirs.

All of this made him pause, but the fact and nature of the golden blade spurred him on.

‘I ask you—nay, I require you,’ he said imperiously, ‘to immediately descend from where you are and to give place to me. This do, and I will spare you. Descend! Descend, I say!’

In a moment of sudden discernment Balwone knew this man to be as much a prince as was he and to have nobility that had come both from birth and royal endowment, and the line of fear in him began to grow. He knew he dare not give way to this, dare not desist, for then he would have to acknowledge the

futility of his pilgrimage and the great knowledge of his own high destiny. The memory of his late trance and the silent watchers troubled him, but he told himself the Voice had not been that of the Most High and that his silent audience had been an illusion which may have arisen from his own inscrutable depths or have been a visitation upon him from the powers of evil.

He felt it incumbent upon him to realise the golden hour, and with this he lifted his sword and rushed upon the silent figure. This sword—he well knew—had never been withdrawn from its scabbard to do evil but only to contest and defeat it. So it must now be the case. With this he had fought evil men, deadly creatures and all forms of high evil. Now the destiny of the world was at stake and he must fulfil for the universe that which the ancient wisdom had spoken, that which the prophets had foretold and that which his will now told him must surely be.

‘I warn you,’ he cried to the other prince, ‘I warn you that he who sent me to emancipate this world in love, for love, gives me the power to unseat you and liberate the universe.’

The eyes of the other smiled gently, strongly and with quiet confidence.

‘In this way would you promote love?’ he asked. ‘In this way would you demonstrate the true love—by such a killing?’

For a moment Balwone again hesitated, but knew in that very moment that should he pause then his cause would be lost forever. The sword could not do evil; what it would accomplish must surely be holy. Yet he felt an overwhelming flood of dreadful doubt, and this might have stayed his hand, except that high and holy ambition was an insistent drive that urged him on silently and strongly so that he could no longer withhold the sword or himself.

With an imperious power and majesty he plunged the sword into the man who dared to resist him. He knew a wild triumph as the other fell forward, sinking somewhat towards the ground, yet retaining his coverage of the golden object.

‘Unseat! Unseat!’ cried Balwone, but the other did not move from his place.

Instead, out of the terrible pain inflicted by his opponent, he cried, ‘Be calm! Be calm! Give way to peace! Give way to love!’

In such a way fulfil your destiny, but not in this way of wrong!’

The knight’s fury knew no bounds so that again and again he thrust his sword into the noble body and finally into the heart of his unresisting opponent. A natural horror of slaying an unresistant enemy came to him—born of years of training in honourable chivalry—but it was more than counteracted by the knowledge that now mankind would be free, and all would be caught up in unifying love. Love had come with him and it would be the fulfilment of his ambition! His fulfilment would be its liberation and its splendid achievement! Thus he reasoned for this moment as—with a shudder—he drove the slim golden shaft into the heart of the other.

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Even as he looked at the man, a great horror was descending upon his spirit. Those eyes so gentle, so filled with deep sorrow, were as the eyes of the ones he had always loved—his father, mother, mentor, protector and other friends. Yet they were not their eyes. The eyes into which he stared so deeply, and which looked back at him, and also into him, *were his own eyes*.

*His own eyes!* He could not believe what he saw. He saw that not only the eyes but also the face and the whole body of that other noble person resembled him in every detail. They were but him, *himself!* He dared not to believe that which his eyes regard-ed and his inner spirit recognised. It was then—at that moment of recognition—that the light began to die out of those other eyes, and the body—bleeding profusely so that its blood flowed over all the golden egg—collapsed, shuddered, and was still.

With his breast heaving in terror and sorrow he dropped beside the other figure. He wanted to bring back this one to life, and he sobbed piteously in his powerlessness, ‘Come back, true prince! Come back, I pray you! I knew not what I was doing or I would never have done it. In the name of the Most High I plead for your forgiveness. Return, I pray. Return to life!’

In that moment he wondered whether the sword itself had betrayed him, but he could not know. The sword had done his

bidding when he had thought he was doing the bidding of the sword.

The other man still retained his last vestige of life. He was whispering, and so low was his utterance that Balwone bowed low to his lips and then placed an ear to them.

As the words came he could not be sure they were from the other prince or whether they were the words of the Voice—the true Voice he had so recently heard.

‘Had you not loved love, you may have had opportunity to bring it to us all. Now you have lost that right. You have be-trayed love. Had you really understood love, you would never have had ambition for it, but known it would do its own good thing, for it is love alone that shapes true destiny. Love alone can liberate love. Love is the Most High himself.’

Balwone scarcely heard the last breath that slipped away as a gentle sigh with the spirit of the noble prince. Tears blinded Balwone’s eyes so that he could scarcely see the inert lord. In that moment he knew he had done what would forever be irreversible. He had committed high infamy. Now he would have to live the tragedy and the horror of his act for time without end.

In his pain he sank to the ground, prostrating himself in his immeasurable anguish and grief. What was burning in his mind was the deed which had come through the golden sword. Always it had protected him against evil and always it had helped him to defeat evil. Was it then the instrument of evil and, if it was, then were all his values, all his understanding of wisdom wrong? He could not bear the revelation that good was not good, love was not love and evil was not evil. He had somehow come into the darkness of an intolerable bewilderment, and his suffering could have no end, nor could it ever merit redress.

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Whilst he lay in despair before the prostrate figure of the man who was now dead, but who was undoubtedly he himself—Balwone, the noble knight of Zagon, son of Facius and Merphein and disciple of the sage Flamgrid—he thought he would never live again. With this other self—the more noble keeper of the

golden egg of love—he had died and was forever dead. Yet the horror of it all was that he could never die. He had even forfeited death and must live as a solitary being—shunned by all, though known by all. Like the stars which wander on an unknown track—bound for nowhere—he who had committed high treason against his race must likewise wander tracklessly.

He wondered that the dragons did not come back to sneer and jeer and that giants did not return to vent scorn and their spleen. He longed for those who loved him to appear, but he deeply dreaded any such appearance. It was as though he himself were unmasked forever, so that life could hold nothing ahead. His grey spirit lay in a lethal despair, but he could not die. How he longed for such a passage from the dreadful thing he had done, and the evil of his own heart.

As he felt the torture of it all, he heard a noise and turned to see what was happening.

At first he saw nothing other than that which was. The dead man lay where he had fallen from the golden egg. Yet the egg seemed different now that it was left uncared for. Its golden glow had dimmed. Indeed, it scarcely seemed to be golden at all—a thing wholly drained of its former glory. Then he heard the noise again. It was the egg—the egg of love—and it was breaking open, splitting into two from the centre. He stared with feelings of mixed joy and horror. Was it then that love was coming to the world even in spite of his dastardly act, or even because of it? In the mystery of wisdom was a miracle happening?

He continued to stare, and as he did so the egg broke open and the two pieces fell apart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### So Much Joy at Failure

**B**ALWONE, almost paralysed in his fascination of the breaking egg, yet moved towards it, and peered into it, and then recoiled with horror. There, within it, slowly uncoiling itself, was a reptile, the like of which he had never seen. His mind thought wildly of the birth of a dragon or some supernatural evil creature, but it was the eyes of the thing that held him. They glittered unwinkingly, staring at him. The beady look held him as though in a trance.

It kept its gaze fixed on him whilst it uncoiled further. Finally it had stretched its full length, outside of the broken shell, and as he looked he saw it gain a kind of strength, though in all truth it looked to be without the power he had come to associate with other forms of evil.

Then the thing spoke. It had a thin, reedy voice, without modulation or resonance. It was as though it spoke from death, so dull and flat it was, but for all that it was filled with a deadly venom.

‘So you have given birth to me,’ it said. ‘Yet this is not birth. As you see me so I ever was. This—what I am—you ever were. Human pride is as a serpent, and a serpent is as human pride. We were born of the same origin. Now we are one—you and I.’

Balwone could not believe the awful message. Instinctively he felt for his sword, but it was not there. Sheath and blade had disappeared, and he was alone—without defence. In a moment he wondered concerning the sword; he questioned whether it had ever done him good—had ever been there to protect from evil or destroy it. He floundered in his spirit and listened with a sense of shock to the statements of the creature.

'You did what you did for love,' it told him, 'but then that was no love. Yet it was all the love you have—that any one has. Such love as you imagined in your mind and heart does not really exist.'

Now there was feeling in the voice. 'Love?' continued the creature. 'There is no love. If there is, then it is far from us both.'

He heard a sibilant sound as the creature flicked its tongue, looked towards the forest and towards the murdered prince. Something like a leer appeared on its features, and the eyes—if possible—glittered even more.

'We will never be apart, you and I,' it said. 'This is how it has to be. I like the thought no more than do you, but you have brought yourself to this as you have brought me to yourself.'

Balwone shuddered. In that dark moment he felt himself cut off from all he had loved. Loved! The word was like a shaft of pain in his head and in his heart. He trembled and shook. He wanted to speak to the reptile and make some division between it and him, but realised he had lost such power—if ever he had really had it.

He knew then how deceitful can be the human heart, how variable in its thoughts, how corrupt in its thinking. Yet, at the same time, he wondered how he could see the wrong of such a state, if somehow he was so depraved as to mistake the whole issue of love. His mind was tired beyond true thinking; yet not tired enough to ask itself whether there could be such a thing as true thinking.

He sat near the body of the dead prince and mourned in his spirit. His eyes were closed from fatigue but he did not sleep. He wished somehow to go through this world of pain, into which he had come, so that he might emerge on some other side, but the pangs did not abate, and he endured all as a man does in utter defeat and despair. Somewhere in his mind he wondered whether he would live or whether he would die. He greatly longed to die.

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It was not that the heavy weariness passed, of itself, but he desired to open his eyes and look at the world about him. When

he did, he thought he saw the dead prince dissolving before his eyes, fading and becoming part of the pattern of the grass and soil until his outline was there no more. He watched the two halves of the golden egg also dissolve back into the green of the grass and the brown of the soil. Any glory which had been its own had long faded and its dissolution seemed almost natural. Even so, Balwone was amazed at the happening and looked around for a sight of the reptile.

It was moving furtively towards the forest, its head turning rapidly from side to side as though it feared the onset of some enemy. It paused to give a last long look at the tired knight, but what it saw seemed not to please it and it slid towards the edge of the forest. Once more it paused, and Balwone saw the glittering of its eyes and the flickering of its tongue, and then it was gone from sight, hidden, probably, by the forest foliage.

When he stood wearily and looked towards the place where the egg had lain, he found the peak, as such, had also dissolved. Some kind of spirit returned to him, and some sort of life. He swung around to look down at the mountain he had climbed but it was now no mountain. He was on a plain of sorts. The slopes of the hill were no longer to be seen, and the harsh grey of the forest lands of Allein was no more. The forest had given way to a vista of green fields, undulating in soft beauty, leading his gaze towards the western sky where low hills were in soft pastels of blue and pink, and the sky was flushed with a gentle cerise as the sun began to sink behind the horizon.

Now he was bewildered. He had thought himself to be in a death of weariness and despair, but in a kindly way the pain was dying and relief was softly surging through him. With it came an intense sadness and a longing for oblivion so that his mind—fatigued as it was—might never need to think again. The dissolving of the body of the other Balwone, and the fleeing of the reptile, brought some strange comfort to him. He wondered how a being so lacerated in spirit as himself could ever heal, and yet it seemed something like this was happening in these moments.

The sun was suddenly withdrawn and the blue hills became black. A silver ball, slightly touched with golden hue, swung into

the sky and its colour began to spread across the new landscape before him.

'Now,' he thought, 'the dragon will come and with him his cohorts, and the giants will gather around, and the mockery will begin. These will show no mercy.'

They did not come, and yet without their accusation he still did not know release from his pangs of heart and conscience. The fatigue was there in his body and also in his mind, so he lay on the grass before him and desired sleep. He slept and his slumber was without horror, without memory, without visitation. The death he desired—the death of oblivion—came mercifully to him though he knew it not.

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It was midnight when he heard the sound. He started up fearfully, his mind still remembering the dreadful things of the immediate past, but the sound he heard was a whinnying, and a barking, and a shouting, and as he stood the moon shone brilliantly on a white stallion, and it was racing towards him, its mane and tail flowing with the speed of its charge. Behind the white horse was a great tawny mastiff, and its deep barking sounded like sweet thunder. Far behind them was also a man on another horse, a great thundering horse which, for all its power, could not keep pace with the wild and glorious stallion, and as he peered across the plain Balwone knew the rider of the steed to be his friend and helper, Roget.

His heart was a mixture of rich joy and intense pain. How could he meet these his old friends, seeing he had betrayed the high cause for which he had been born and in which they had laboured with him? So he watched, tears brimming in his eyes, joy jumping within his heart, and searing pain behind his mind and within his spirit.

Ballia nuzzled him with joy and affection. The great tawny mastiff jumped up on him and licked him with a hot tongue. Panting, Roget joined them, and he rushed forward to hug his master and friend, only to find that the knight was seeking to fend him off.

'No!' Balwone was crying wildly. 'I am not the one you thought I was. I am not "Balwone the Great". I am "Balwone the Least"—the least of them all. I am worse than a dead dog. I am not worthy of the love of you who were my friends. I have betrayed my cause and destroyed my destiny.'

For a time Roget let him rave on, and somehow he collected the heart of the matter from statements and phrases that the seemingly demented knight was uttering. There were tears and sorrow, self-accusation and painful remorse, and finally nothing but an uncontrollable spate of tears that gushed from the knight of Zagon.

When, exhausted, he had finished, he lowered himself to the ground and continued his sobbing, head in hands. The stallion stood still as though part of the silvered landscape, whilst the great mastiff stretched out along his old master and whimpered softly.

Roget waited until hours had passed, and when he thought the time was right, and the hour ripe for utterance, he began to speak in a strong but gentle voice.

'It is as Flamgrid said it would be,' he told his master. 'He said we would find thee in immense sorrow, but that thy sorrow would be the gateway to a great joy and an unspeakable peace. This is what he said. He said we must bear with thee until thy wounds heal and thou art ready to return. He said to tell thee only one thing, and it is this: "Thou, Balwone, art now almost ready to be the true servant of Massia. Thou hast died and art alive again. Only those who die in this way can be the servants of Massia who is himself the true servant of the Most High."'

Balwone heard these words with wonder. For some long time he pondered them, and then he spoke, but it was as in a whisper and his voice was hoarse with new emotion.

'Roget, my old friend,' he said. 'You have heard me say I betrayed our cause, and yet you tell me these things from Flamgrid. He does not now know or understand the depths of my evil. He would shun me, were he to know. Roget, there is no hope for me.'

'Once there was no hope for me, I mind,' said Roget, 'but thou didst release me and thou didst give me new life. In this

there was true love, and I will not have it that thou art without love. Nay, Flamgrid knows all things, for the Voice and the Presence have told him, and so these must be the thoughts of the Most High.'

At the words of his friend, Balwone started trembling. It was the trembling of a great ague which shook him in great rigours, and the stallion, looking at him, gently stamped the ground and softly pawed at the soil and the grass. The large mastiff whimpered more and crept closer to the shuddering body of its master, whilst Roget let his tears flow in pity for his friend. It was as though he were seeing his master die. The Great Balwone was shivering down to a nothing of his being, to a wisp of the former knight of chivalry and glory—a man who had refused fame and a throne. He lay on the ground, his legs and arms threshing, his head rolling and his body in dreadful shaking and uncontrollable trembling.

'He is dying,' Roget said to himself. 'He is dying as a man has never died. He is dying from within, and all his joy has dried up.'

He continued to watch, knowing he could do nothing, but strangely at peace in the knowledge that he was helpless to heal the tortured being before him. Morna, the mastiff, put out paws that would touch the knight of Zagon, as though the laying on of those paws might bring life back to this one in shuddering death. Ballia continued his pawing of the ground as though it were a mystic rite that would ensure the life of the man who was teetering on the rim of an eternal dying.

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It was near the time of dawn when the knight became inert. He lay still beside the faithful hound. The body was cold to the touch of the servant Roget, and that squire felt a shuddering within his own spirit. Ballia stood as though frozen in form, his noble lines showing against the first flush of the new morning. It was as though the true trio of friends scarce dared to breathe where the life had gone from their beloved friend.

It was then the rays of the sun shot suddenly into the sky, no longer roseate but of a brilliant golden, and the half-light of the

parting night glowed into new brightness, the sky itself turning to new azure, and the prairie around them flooded with colour until it seemed almost to throb.

The mastiff stirred and a growl of joy was in its throat. Ballia threw up his head and whinnied to the high skies, whilst Roget was bewildered at the throb of the prairie which was resonating within his spirit. Before his eyes he saw the dead prince stir and sit up, looking about him wildly, as a man from the dead might suddenly see himself to be alive and wonder at the miracle.

He looked up at Roget, who was standing legs apart, hands on hips and holding back a new flood of tears which were spring-ing from the fountain of joy.

'Thou art alive, Master!' he cried. 'Thou who didst die in the dark night and in the terror of all things. Thou art alive with us, as Flamgrid said thou wouldst be. Oh, mercy, Master! Great mercy of the Most High!'

Balwone sat, still bewildered. He saw the pity in the eyes of his squire, and the desire to comfort in the deep gaze of hound and horse. Freshets of new life started to his eyes, as though their love had resurrected him from the shuddering death he had known. Roget was applying a flask to his lips and from it he drank deeply and gratefully. Then Roget was drawing small slabs of spiced bread from his wallet and sharing these with the thankful knight. Together they sat in the splendour of the new day, and a choir of larks flew up into the blue, taking their songs with them but then letting them fall like fountains of soft music and sheer delight on the men and their animals.

It was then that joy started into the heart of the son of Facius and Merphein for he could see the eyes of his mother and father upon him, and in them was no condemnation, no judgment of his great sin of atrocious human pride and consequent merciless murder. He knew that they knew, but he also knew, with amaze-ment, that they understood the nature of his pride, and found no place in their hearts, and in their true wisdom, to condemn him.

He wondered, then, what Merom and Gothic would think when they knew of his failure. There were others, too, who mattered, such as Firsini, Pequey and the monarchs of Manignia,

Zed and Cathrid. Where would he now stand with all these? At first he was ashamed for desiring their view of him to be high when he had forfeited any such right. Yet the message of Roget concerning Flamgrid had burned into his mind and would not be erased. 'Thou art alive with us, as Flamgrid said thou wouldst be.' Flamgrid had known all things and yet he had not rejected his old pupil. Here there was hope, and the eyes of the knight of Zagon gleamed for a moment, and Roget thought his old friend was indeed being resurrected.

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It was then Balwone discovered what innumerable human beings have discovered over the ages—that a person's humanity is incredibly resilient. The knight remembered the children he had met in his lifetime, and men and women he had seen and with whom he had had converse and relationship. He remembered the peasants he had met and the outcasts of society such as lived in the ragged quarters of Cotillon and, although he had seen much anger and despair, much bitterness and cunning, he had also seen much of it turn to beauty when the opportunity came.

Thinking over these things he was greatly enspirited. It was as though life were returning, and, even if only in dribs and drabs, it was flowing with new hope. He gazed at Roget with undisguised love. He patted the mastiff standing at his side and murmured the name of the hound. He looked at Ballia whose neck was arched, whose head was yet proud and high and whose noble form was filling the knight with a desire to mount and ride free.

That was the moment of his true resurrection. He held the mane of the strong stallion and leapt onto its back.

'Oh, hoi!' he cried. 'Oh, hoi!' and his legs gripped the sides of the mount. He gently flicked the flanks with his heels and the great animal sprang to life. Roget set a foot in a stirrup and swung himself into the saddle of his sturdy steed.

He also cried, 'Oh hoi! Oh, hoi!' and in a few moments both horses were striding across the thick matted grass of the prairie, and their goal was a forest which lay in the distance. Behind them

the great mastiff Morna was following with loping steps, and the horses would never outpace it.

What surprised the knight of Zagon was the joy which was beginning to well in his heart. He had thought joy would have been vanquished forever and that the things of death alone would face him. Now it was revealed that when he had ceased to be Balwone the Great his spirit was liberated. The vanquishing of the golden egg by its cracking falsity and the emergence of the despicable reptile, all told him that though the quest had been in vain to free an oppressed world, yet his own demise as a man of fame had set him free to know joy of a new kind, and—he hoped—love of another vintage. Of the latter he could not be sure, but as Ballia bounded forward with ever-increasing speed, so did his heart and mind and spirit do the same.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## Dragons and Sages

By nightfall they had traversed the wide fields of pastures, passing through flocks of sheep and goats, and herds of longhorned cattle. These had taken little notice of them, so they had spurred on their steeds until they reached the edge of the forest. As their custom had always been, they found the shelter of a grassy glade fringed by tall forest trees, near which was a brook of soft water. Roget had brought rations to sustain both men and the three animals, and so they made camp in the grassy grove. It was the time of spring, and so buttercups and bluebells, and other such flowers, gave colour to their surroundings, whilst the songs and cries and rustlings of birds and animals provided the familiar music that cheered the pilgrims who were returning to Flamgrid.

They ate their evening rations warmed over a fire and they drank sweet fluid from the silver flasks provided by the cobbler of the kingdom of Zed. They talked far into the night and, because wearied by good conversation and the effects of the fast travelling of the day, they fell immediately into deep sleep, whilst Ballia and Morna kept watch over them.

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Balwone was not surprised when he saw the great dragon in the grove, its yellow eyes as fiery and fierce as ever, and the great bulk of it thrust forward in immense arrogance. Its voice held the strong power of accusation.

‘So the holy knight would return to this life after his unholy fall!’ it jeered.

Balwone said nothing. He did not even slip his hand to his side for fear the great dragon would jeer afresh at that gesture. He also feared lest the sword had been taken from him forever.

‘You, Balwone, are finished,’ said the ponderous creature, as though it knew the man’s thoughts and sensed his desperation. ‘You will never hold up your head in the affairs of men and creatures. You have been crushed beyond even human pride.’

Balwone nodded slightly but said nothing.

The dragon seemed a trifle surprised and, like Balwone, kept silent for a period. Then, as thought came to it, it roared again.

‘Your golden egg of love—socalled—proved false, and all you could bring forth was a reptile of the order that all despise.’

Again the accusation was sharp, but Balwone held counsel with himself and said nothing.

‘So we have a different Balwone,’ sneered the great beast. ‘We have a man who has been crushed to nothing. He dare not even speak for himself. This holy knight has indeed become demeaned.’

As he looked, Balwone saw the scars of the dragon, the scars of his own previous sword thrusts, and he marvelled. There had been something of reality in his former battles with the creature. The beast had been evil, and was still thus. Even so, Balwone said nothing.

Now the spirit of the dreadful creature before him was stoked to flaming fire and sulphurous fumes of strong white smoke.

‘I have power to destroy you now!’ it screamed. ‘You are a murderer and nothing can protect you.’ It gave a hideous smirk, but made no effort to move forwards. ‘Your hour will come,’ it shrieked with venomous tones, ‘and in that hour I will claim you.’

Balwone knew he had no answers or counterclaims to make against the beast for he was ignorant of his position before this creature and even before the Most High.

It was the silence which enraged the dragon. He bellowed, ‘To sword! To sword! And we will fight now, to the bitter end!’

Balwone seemed to have misheard the beast. It was as though it had cried, ‘To word! To word!’ and at these statements memory came to him from the Writings of the sages. It was then he spoke.

'You are not judge,' he said quietly. 'You have no power to judge. Accuse you may well do, but to judge is not given to you. There is one judge and that is the Most High. This power his servant Massia may also have, but of that I know nothing.'

'You would be judged by the Most High?' the creature asked in astonishment. 'You would stand before that Holy One?'

'I would rather stand before him than before you,' was the retort.

The beast started. 'You have become even more dangerous than when you were in your conceits,' it snarled. 'The murderer has become a sage through his own evil! Now this is a remarkable thing! The like has never been heard before.'

'The like has been heard before,' said a voice, and Balwone saw it was Roget at his side who dared to speak.

The huge smoking creature turned to the squire and a pall of smoke emerged from its distended nostrils, as though it would choke its new opponent to death.

'The creature Roget would dare to speak?' it asked. 'The murderer has become a holy man and faces the beast with his pretences to honour?'

Roget looked steadily towards the great dragon. 'The sin of my murder was sin indeed,' he said, 'and worse because I did it in order to live. What this man beside me has done was done in sincerity, even if it was also in error. If the Most High can give life back to me, a murderer, then he will undeceive my master of your deceits.'

So terrible was the rage of the scaly beast that Balwone thought it would rush upon them and devour them in the holocaust of its exploding flames. Even so, this was not the case. The creature growled within itself, but Balwone knew the words of his friend had undone the raging dragon.

For a time it remained silent, though fuming heavily. Then it made its parting accusation.

'You shall both go down into the shades where there is only darkness and where even the mercy of the Most High can never reach you. This is my authority, for both of you are murderers of men, and therefore both must go into those shades forever.'

Horror shot into the heart of the knight of Zagon, but the look on Roget's face remained steady and undisturbed. He stared at the fiery beast with contempt and silenced its accusation.

The last Balwone saw of the beast was its snarling features, its huge body retreating into darkness where it was finally lost, although the stench of its sulphurous fumes remained, for the time, in the glade.

'Then you saw the dragon!' said Balwone. 'You also fought with it! Beforetimes you seemed not to see it. It was a creature with which I alone would do battle.'

'When we become that which we are by nature,' said Roget, 'we have all things in common. We two—with all other humans—have our humanity in common. Here, in this battle against evil, none is a lord, none a feoff. We are of one kingdom, and we do battle against another kingdom—it being the reign of darkness. Together we are of the Most High. We are one.' He saw the amazement on the face of his master and knew that what he had said was new to that other person.

'Our master Flamgrid told me of these things,' he said, and his voice was somewhat apologetic. 'He said we would meet the dragon and that the power of this beast lies in both accusation and deception. Just as truth never lies in deception, so it never lies in accusation. These were the words of the wise cobbler.'

They both settled back to rest. Pure air had flowed afresh into the glade, and the pollution had gone. With its going the mind of Balwone could think more clearly. The giant of a man next to him was soon sleeping, but Balwone thought on until the first whisperings of dawn came with the awakening day birds, but then—as though given the gift of peace—he fell into a deep sleep.

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It was the next day that they reached the familiar glen of the cobbler. That man came running to them, and Balwone had scarcely alighted from Ballia when he was seized by the sage. Balwone started at the aged look of his friend, for his hair had grown grey and his face was wrinkled with the years that had passed, but the fire in his eyes was undimmed and the joy of the man was as a

tonic to the returning knight. Privately Balwone wondered how many years had elapsed whilst he was passing through the land of Allein and in reaching the peak of the holy mountain. It could have been but a short period, but judging by the features of Flamgrid it had taken many years.

For a moment he wondered whether he ought really to suffer the embrace of his old friend—so unworthy of it he felt himself to be—but joy was in his heart and he hugged and kissed his old mentor. He also wept in the distress of his failure, falling at the feet of the cobbler as though giving proof of his contrition and repentance for that failure.

‘Nay! Nay!’ said Flamgrid. ‘Kneel not. Neither be sad. This is a great day of rejoicing. The new Balwone has come to the glade and his training is almost complete! Now he is ready to serve not himself but Massia, and in serving Massia to serve the Most High.’

Balwone wondered why the name of Massia did not stir him as at other times—those times when pangs of jealousy had taken hold of him and he had almost judged Massia to be a usurper. Now it seemed to him that the name Massia was very sweet in his hearing and he longed to know this great one. His own pride had died with the thrust of the sword into that other Balwone, the one whose eyes and whose gentle sorrow he would never forget.

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It was late in the day when they had arrived at Flamgrid’s home, and so the cobbler bade them rest upon the benches whilst he prepared the evening meal. Ballia was given golden hay and sweetsmelling provender, whilst the hound lay with a massive bone locked in its jaws. Its eyes were upon Balwone, and he—for his part—felt comforted by the great dog. Should he have occasion to pass Ballia’s booth, the stallion would snicker softly, and its affection flowed like healing balm into the inner wounds of the still lacerated knight.

They ate silently at first until their bodies were warmed with the provisions, and as they relaxed the conversation began to flow. Such words and thoughts Balwone had never dreamed he would hear, and he drank them in as a thirsting man drinks sweet water

after days in a parching desert. He was a man coming back from death, hearing the things of life but hearing them as for the first time.

Flamgrid said, ‘Your destiny was not lost on the high peak of the mountain. It was destined that there you should die.’

For a moment Balwone was silent. Then he said, ‘But I did not die. It was the other who died. I killed him with the golden sword.’ Puzzlement troubled his face as he thought of the sword.

‘The sword did no evil,’ said Flamgrid. ‘The sword is the word of the Most High, and he desired that you should die that you might live again. In all this the sword did rightly at its Master’s bidding.’

‘But it was the other who died,’ said the knight, fearful lest Flamgrid should be mistaken.

Flamgrid shook his head. ‘Nay,’ he said, ‘but he whom you slew was but you as the true one, your true self.’

Balwone was puzzled. ‘He whom I slew was true. That which is true must not be killed by that which is untrue—as I was. Therefore I doubly offended. Had he destroyed me, then that would have been justice.’

‘Justice it would have been,’ said the cobbler, ‘that is, as men count justice, but justice is not love. Love took the blade that killed it, that the one who killed might become the true one.’

‘This is a riddle that I cannot know, nor can I ever solve it,’ said the knight.

‘Then you must listen,’ said the wise man of Zed. ‘Your ways of thinking must change. You must see that this one whose eyes you read as love desired that you die in him. As you destroyed him, so he destroyed that you that was, to make true the you that was yet to be, and that true you was not then you, but now is.’

Roget clapped heartily. ‘How simple it is!’ he cried. ‘Love takes the death that it might give life to the killer!’

‘That is so,’ said Flamgrid nodding calmly. ‘This new Balwone we have here with us is the one whom the old Balwone slew, only to die himself and come alive as the new one.’

Balwone was silent, pondering the words. There then came to his mind the gaze of both Facius and Merphein in his vision, and the contentment in their eyes had then been to him as a balm upon

his sore soul. He knew that look was not one of those who had been deceived, but of those who knew. This greatly heartened him, and he set about solving the riddle known so well to the cobbler and the squire.

As he did, he remembered the words of the angry dragon, 'You have become even more dangerous than when you were in your conceits,' and his heart knew a throb of joy.

'Then I am a different man,' he said, 'and I am as one risen from the dead.'

'You slew yourself,' said Flamgrid, 'but the you that took your murder in love is now the one you have become.'

The knight marvelled, for he was seeing the form of the other fade away on the peak, and he was seeing himself dying out in the prairie, dying of the ague and the shuddering and the rackings of pain. That night had been the darkness that one may only ever know once, for it is the death of him that will alone bring him to life.

'Tell me,' he said suddenly, gripping Flamgrid's right arm and holding it fiercely, 'Tell me how a man can be two, and one better than the other. Where does the first one—the lover—get such love as to take the other by death, then take him into death that the first may live, and not be doomed to the death of the murderer?'

'All this comes from the Most High,' said the cobbler-sage. 'This is his way in all things. Love comes only from him.'

Balwone meditated on this reply for some moments. Then he cried, 'Then I was wrong. I thought I was—of myself—a great lover, a lover perhaps beyond all men. I was terribly in error for my love was not true love. It was love from myself, and such true love as is needed cannot come from me.'

'Now you have seen it,' said Flamgrid. 'Now you have seen all. It was towards this that the wise ones were moving in their days. They knew that love must transform the world, since hatred could only destroy it. They looked for the means of finding this love and then bringing it to mankind.'

'Out of this desire—this terrible need of the human race—the myth of the golden egg was born,' said Balwone, suddenly understanding.

Flamgrid nodded. 'Out of this,' he said, 'but their wisdom was not true. They said that in much pain this egg would be laid and then kept nourished and find heat enough to come to life, but they were fearfully wrong.'

'But these things concerning love I learned from you,' said Balwone without accusation. 'You should have told me the truth then.'

'Nay,' said Flamgrid, 'we but said it was your destiny to go to that mountain and to fulfil the myth. The world was waiting upon the one who would come to bring love, and it was thought this would be the way. You yourself were in that error.'

'We were all in error then,' exclaimed the knight.

'Gently, Balwone, gently,' said the cobbler. 'We all knew you were the one appointed to go to that mountain and to assist in the breaking of the egg, but those who loved you were not assured your destiny would there be complete and fulfilled. That destiny has yet to be fulfilled.'

Balwone looked at Flamgrid with great puzzlement. 'Now I know less than ever I did,' he said. 'Why then did I fight with dragons and giants, and how was it that I released prisoners and slaves of those creatures so that they could return to life? Was that not pure love?'

A kindly look came into the eyes of the sage of Zed.

'There is much that you yet have to learn,' he said, 'and much that has to be explained to you. This, however, you must now know. Balwone who was Great has become Balwone who is Least. He has died by killing himself, but the one he has killed has given him his true life. All this was as it should be. This Balwone the Least may now truly become Balwone the Great, for this is the way of love.'

'If this be true,' cried the knight with joy, 'then I am content! If I never understand the mystery, I can nevertheless live in the reality of that which you assure me. It is as food to my dying soul and as an elixir to my fainting spirit. I, Balwone, am assured that I am alive, but not as the Balwone that was, but as the Balwone who in truth is the genuine one.'

Flamgrid's smile grew into a huge grin. 'Well spoken, my friend!' he cried. 'You are no murderer as though you had killed

one other than yourself. Your crime which you did in your anger has turned out to your good because of the love that was given by the Most High to him who was your other self.'

Balwone could hear and understand enough to know the immense relief of his crime removed, and his spirit not only made whole, but whole in a way it had never been. Thoughts darted in his mind like jewelled insects that feed on proliferating flowers, drawing nectar from here and darting there for more. He knew his horn of wine would never run dry nor his flask of love ever be emptied.

He stared at his host with amazement and at his friend, Roget, with immense joy. In the stall Ballia snickered out sounds of delight and Morna turned up soulful eyes to its new and beloved master. The sounds of the forest around them were as a symphony of instrumental players, and the music was a healing balm to them all. Like good wine, the joy came coursing along every vein, and the men and beasts were in great contentment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### The Coming of Massia

**B**ALWONE woke the next morning long before the sun had broken the night into a glowing dawn. Not even the first intimations of its rising were in the forest. Creatures scuttled back to their hidden habitations and the night birds had fallen silent. Faint whisperings of the day's life were commencing. There were still patches of darkness in the Flamgrid grove, but Balwone struggled out of his sleeping covers.

Outside he stood and flexed his body, his hands high over his head and his spirit seeking to worship the Most High. After a time he went to the stream and bathed. The cold waters first chilled his body and then as he exercised he became warm and alive. He was still relishing in his mind the welcome of the cobbler and the strange exoneration from the deed he had done on the peak of the holy mountain. Fragments of guilt seemed to gather about him in his conscience, but he shook them off determinedly. He believed that some regeneration had come to him, and no dragon or giant would ever take this from him.

He watched the dawn break behind the forest-giants—the trees which were ageless—and into his spirit came a sense of anticipation, as though the greatest day of all his life was to come upon him and to break open, and with its breaking would come wisdom and love—the two things which he valued most of all things. Why he should think this he knew not. Were there also faint intimations of the coming hours from soft utterings of the Voice? He did not know; he strained to hear what might be said, for the silence was not wholly mute but was alive, warm and palpable. Even so, he heard no Voice.

He sat on a log before the last embers of the night's fire, tossing fragments of twigs and sticks on it and then small billets

of wood. He stared into the fire as it grew again into life, and it seemed to him like a parable of his own renewal. The other two men slept on and Ballia and Morna kept the peace of stillness as though in respect for their masters.

Later he watched Flamgrid emerge from his booth, and he thought with a certain sadness that this man had greatly aged. He saw the tired lines of the teacher he loved, and the smile the cobbler gave him was tinged with weariness. Even so, he straightened up, swung his arms in a flailing circular motion as though he would set his blood flowing afresh and give new energy to his mind and body. Flamgrid came across to Balwone and sat beside him, peering into the mysterious pictures the new coals were build-ing as fuel for man's imagination. He laid a hand on Balwone's wrist and left it there, a hand that was without its former vib-rancy. It was warm and soft, gentle in its touch and intimate in its communication. Quietly Roget joined them by the fire.

'Today,' he said, 'we come to the great revelation. Today we go beyond all the wisdom we have hitherto learned. We come to the great day of Massia.'

Balwone looked at him, astonished. 'Today is the day of Massia?' he asked, incredulous.

Flamgrid shook his head. 'Every day has been the day of Massia. It has been his day even before time began. It was even before the days of all the gods and the lords which have ruled our kingdoms, though unseen to us. It was ever his day before the sun and the moon came to light our world and before all the stars swam into the heavens above. When there were none of these, Massia always was.'

Balwone nodded. 'That much I do understand,' he said, 'but this Massia has not come from the place of the Most High and visited the haunts of us who are human. He has not dispossessed the gods and the lords, or shown himself greater than the stars through whom we learn much wisdom. It was out of their wisdom and foresight that we devised the truth of love. We saw that true wisdom is love and so we believed love would transform our world.'

In the blue eyes of the old cobbler there were deep shades of violet. These reminded him of Merphein, his gentle mother, and

he found himself both troubled and comforted. Yet it was as though Flamgrid was speaking to him out of some hitherto unspoken world of knowledge and wisdom. What did the sage mean by this day being the day of revelation and being the great day of Massia? That was what troubled him.

For some time both remained silent. Flamgrid was thinking of the shock he was about to bring to his beloved pupil, and that pupil was in the same moment remembering that there had once been a man named 'Balwone the Great' and that he had erred greatly in his understanding of his destiny and in thinking that he could bring love to the world that so needed healing. What he had thought had never come to pass, and fightings with dragons and giants had come to nought—nought, that is, apart from the hum-bling of his spirit.

As though he understood what his companion was thinking, Flamgrid began his story.

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'Centuries ago our kingdoms—those of Zed and Manignia, of Cathrid and even of Flagland and Miridon—were visited by a strange people. They were known as the People of the Most High God. They came into our region from beyond our southernmost parts and they visited us as those who were gentle and humble. They had their own culture, their traditions, their wisdom writings and their songs. Although they were folk with some sadness in their spirits, they were also capable of great joy, and held festivals to celebrate the greatness of their history and the wonders that had happened in the days of their founding, albeit that had come to pass many centuries before.

'When they came to our kingdoms they were neither welcomed nor shunned. They were allowed to make nests, as it were, that is to say, havens, in most of our large towns and cities. They were not denied their rituals which—for the most part—they carried out in a decent manner. We were aware they did not worship our gods and idols and spirits—the lords we had known from the ancient times, and whom we greatly revered, and to whom we offered many kinds of sacrifices.

‘Our own wise men sought to read the writings of their sages, but they were reluctant to surrender or even to lend their manuscripts to our peoples. This our forefathers seemed to understand and they did nought about the matter, for these new—though ancient—people were of a gentle disposition and in no way desired to possess the things which were ours. Indeed, they sought to help us to prosper. They had much wisdom in regard to trade and commerce, and they shared their skills in arts and crafts, and so much so that days of great prosperity came to our kingdoms.

‘They, too, shared in this age of greatness, and our monarchs were pleased to honour them with high offices in our lands. So all prospered.’

Flamgrid took a huge log and placed it on the fire and the sparks shot upwards with his action. Balwone marvelled at the strength of the older man. Behind him he heard the soft snickerings of his beloved white stallion. Morna rose from his place of sleeping, shook his great frame so that there was a rattling of his body, and then joined them near the fire, stretching out close to its warmth. Roget also joined them, and together they listened to the saga that was coming from the lips of the cobbler.

‘Prosperity is a danger to any nation,’ said Flamgrid. ‘It is suffering which teaches more than does ease. Human spirits become envious when they have nothing, but more envious when they have much. They then envy the greater prosperity of others and are jealous and seek to wrest it from them to better their own lot.

‘When, then, these people came to our kingdoms, and came without wealth, they were pitied rather than envied. Because they were not warlike they were not seen as a danger, but when the monarchs and lords of those days desired to prosper through the knowledge, wisdom and skills of the sojourners they were glad to give them power in the land. The newcomers did not use the power in despotic ways, but as prosperity grew there were those who wished to be rid of this strange people and to take their places of wealth and ruling.

‘Thus began the days of purging our kingdoms of these folk who had so blessed us by their coming. A strange thing became apparent to those who persecuted them, and it was this: the ones

who had their wealth taken from them, who were dispossessed of their homes, did not fight to retain what they had formerly owned. Without doubt they were afraid of us, for in many ways we were rude nations, previously lacking the culture they brought and the refinements they had.

‘When they did not oppose us, the wise men of our kingdoms enquired of their leaders how it was they did not resist us or fight back. Our own wise men were told that they called themselves the “People of the Most High God”, and that they awaited the days of Massia—the one who was to come and rule them in peace, and with them, the whole world. They told us sad things concerning themselves, mainly that they had been brought out of what they called “the darkness of idols” and had been given certain revelations of the Most High. They had also been given a kingdom of their own—a land of great riches and beauty. Also they had been told that they were the people—above all other peoples—who were to bring the truth of the Most High to the other nations of the earth.’

At this point Balwone interrupted his mentor in his tale. ‘Why is it, Master Flamgrid,’ he asked, ‘that you have not told me these things before?’

A shadow crossed the old man’s face and his eyes lost their light blue intensity. The violet in them deepened. He looked at the knight directly.

‘It was our intention to teach you the ancient lore of our tribes and not to let you know of these people who seemed to possess us by their gentleness, and influence us by the mystery of their humility. When we had purged them from our kingdoms we destroyed all writings relating to them. We went back to the ancient wisdom and withheld knowledge of these people from the generations which followed their exit from our kingdoms.’

‘This is all strange,’ muttered the son of Facius and Merphein, ‘for we do know the Most High and we worship him and we have wisdom and prophecy concerning his Massia.’

‘That is true,’ replied the cobbler. ‘That is the sorrowful thing. Whilst we sought to trample out all vestiges of them and to deal with the guilt of our ingratitude and cruelty, there came yet another people, and these also knew the Most High and his

Massia. They said they had a message of love, joy and peace, even beyond those we had formerly fostered in our midst. Whilst they did not despise the older people of the Most High, they claimed to have a greater wisdom and newer revelations of the Maker of the universe.'

'Of these also I have not heard,' said Balwone. 'It greatly disturbs my spirit to hear these things now.'

Flamgrid nodded in agreement. 'The spirits of many of us are sad concerning these things, but we have had to be cautious. The wise and gentle among us loved the first people of the Most High. When the tragedy of our persecution came upon them, some of the people of our own kingdoms—they who had come to accept them and their teaching—asked of them concerning their submission to the fate of their suffering. They asked how it was that the persecuted could accept such suffering and pain, and they told us it was the way of the Most High. He had purposed their suffering as a chastisement for the idolatry to which they reverted from time to time; yet he had also promised them the advent of Massia, who would come and bring to them an even greater love for him and for all mankind. That love, they told us, would spread to the four corners of the earth and so dispel the cruelty and oppression which those in high places bring upon their fellow creatures. The love and wisdom which Massia would bring with him would heal the kingdoms of the earth.'

'A high claim indeed,' muttered Balwone, and the lacerated spirit within him shuddered. It all sounded like an echo of his former vain ideal.

'Nay!' said Flamgrid with sudden passion. 'Think not in these ways, Balwone my son. The love of which I speak is far beyond the love which drove you to the holy mountain. Such is the revelation to which you must come this day. The fault lies not with you but with us—your mentors. We have kept the greatest of all things from you for that was how it had to be.'

The knight of Zagon sat bewildered on the log by the fire. Within him there was building a great sorrow. His reverence for Flamgrid was crumbling. His respect and esteem for the sages he had always honoured was dwindling with each unmasking of the kingdoms he had always found to be honourable. Also

something of the knowledge and pain in the eyes of his beloved parents was becoming intelligible. To him their compassion had always been a mystery. Now he was learning some of the elements of their gentle sadness. What might have altered his whole destiny had been withheld from him, even by those he had most loved.

He heard Flamgrid's voice as from a great distance. The sage was describing the persecution of the ancient people of the Most High who had submitted to his judgments and who had accepted their ejection from the kingdoms which they had helped to prosper. The new people of the Most High were different from the older ones—those who lived simply in their traditions, never trying to change the culture in which they lived. These new ones had come with great zeal to change the ways and thinking of the northern kingdoms. They had not brought again the rituals of the older culture, nor were they concerned for the prosperity of the kingdoms. It seemed their gaze was scarcely on this world, but on a kingdom which yet transcended it—a kingdom of another quality and nature. It seemed they were zealous in their love for Massia and the Most High and that they despised the idols, gods and lords—the spirits who possessed the peoples of these northern kingdoms. They spoke of liberating the tribes of the northern kingdoms from ignorance and oppression. Most of all, they spoke of Massia, as though he had come, and had brought the one true revelation of the Most High.

'If our fathers had been angry with the ancient people of the Most High, they were even more angry with these later ones who came with the claim that in Massia the Most High himself had come to dwell amongst the human race so that he might bring to them freedom from all things which oppressed them and might teach them the ways of love, joy and peace. This, the new zealots claimed, was true wisdom, a wisdom above even that of the people we had banished from our lands.

'Their criticism of our ancient rituals, of our worshippings of national and local deities, roused up great ire among our rulers and the common people. Remembering the older race who worshipped the Most High, and whom they had persecuted and ejected from their kingdoms, they now turned with great savagery

upon the messengers of an even newer religion. No sooner would they appear than they would destroy them or would eject them from the kingdoms.'

Balwone said, 'I hear what you say and I feel greatly sore in my spirit. If these two peoples were worshippers of the Most High, why then have we destroyed them, when we ourselves now know of the Most High and seek to serve him?'

'Ah!' said Flamgrid. 'The matter is difficult. You will notice that we still hold to the old gods and the old spirits, and we give reverence to the lords of our cultures, but all of this is in outward form only, or we grow deeply superstitious and live in the dark-ness of fear. That is why many of us have sought out the sages and prophets and their writings, and have lived by them rather than by the ancient gods whom our fathers revered. We have seen the falsity of those old deities and we have—many of us—formed a better religion. We have come to see that all gods are under the Most High God, so we withhold worship of the others.'

Before Balwone could interrupt him, he proceeded, 'The influence of the old people who worshipped the Most High has never departed from our land. Not only have some of these folk remained amongst us, living in secret places in our forests, but also folk of the newer religion of the Most High have lived secretly in our regions. So, from time to time, we are able to read their writings and to glean something of their faith, even though that is forbidden by our ancient and unchangeable laws. What is more, they have made converts from among us, converts who are loyal to their message and to their writings for, they have helped to preserve both the message and the writings.'

'Why, then,' said the knight of Zagon, 'have I not had access to such writings? How is it that I have not met these people who live in secret? I have been into many places of our kingdoms but I have not come to know of them.'

'Of a truth you have seen some of their writings,' said Flamgrid, 'but the key to such writings you have never been given. All you have learned, and all you have done, has been in accordance with the truth mankind has had from the beginning. Most of the ancients knew of the Most High and of Massia, but

many departed from that truth; yet never so much that it was wholly lost from sight.'

The three men sat silent. Balwone needed time to digest what his mentor was saying. Whilst there was deep bewilderment in his spirit, there was also a growing hope, a sliver of light that was breaking into the gloom and anger of his mind. He had resolved after his visit to the holy mountain never to allow excitement to carry him away again, and a distrust of the past and what he had learned was presently working deeply within him.

'We must break our fast,' said Flamgrid, and he went off to prepare food. Roget rose silently, giving a look of pity to the man who sat so dumbly before the fire. He went to feed the horses and the mastiff, and when this was done he returned. The three men ate silently and drank the brew that the cobbler had prepared before their coming.

Only when they had broken their fast, and the sun had flooded them with a new warmth, did they have spirit enough to resume the teaching the sage was giving them. Roget felt sympathy for his master, but he was eager to hear the new things the cobbler was saying, whilst Balwone himself sat still, staring into the fire, numbed in one way by the new knowledge being given to him, but grasping at the thought that it might bring him to a revelation hitherto undreamed, and so be a way out of his present predicament—to have loved without the result the wise men had promised, and so to have lost his fervour for love, whilst still believing it was the only hope for mankind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## Massia Has Come

F LAMGRID settled himself on the log and the three were conscious of the beauty of the day. The sun was now high enough to flood the grove with golden light that made the green of the grass seem to glow. The small birds were fluttering in the trees about them, seeking insects and honey, and high above them larks had begun their morning music. The sky was sheer azure, clear of clouds and as a perfect bowl covering the glory of the forest, and as a shield for the men who sat in bowed fashion awaiting the truth which was the only purpose for which they had been born.

The cobbler began. 'First I must tell you, Balwone,' he said, and he smiled also at Roget, including him, 'that my foster-father, Zemgrid, was a man of long memory and good wisdom. He it was who had come from the people called "The Tribe of Peace", but he and my foster-mother Femgrid had long known of Massia whom they worshipped and whom they called "the Prince of Peace". These people were called Shemgridions and were members of the newer people who believed in the Most High and so they were versed in the ancient wisdom. They had both the wisdom of the older people of the Most High and the newer wisdom which Massia was to bring to the human race. Whilst my foster-parents rarely mentioned the history of their people, it was when Sophius, the son of Pirinus, visited me that I was fully given the wisdom of the tribes of the Most High. This Sophius was the master of our old hound here—Morna—who by now must be the most ancient and faithful of all mastiffs. But Sophius had the wisdom of love—a wisdom beyond that of all ancients and even beyond that of the first great people of the Most High.'

Morna heard his name mentioned and wagged his tail. Balwone looked at the huge body of the hound and marvelled; yet in his spirit he marvelled more at the news Flamgrid was now sharing—news he had kept to himself over many decades.

Flamgrid continued. 'The things my foster-father told me before his death poured into my mind like hot fire, for neither then nor later did I find the things he said written clearly in the ancient manuscripts. For this reason I kept them to myself, but since those days I have met others of the Shemgridions and they have verified the things told to me. They are the things of Massia, son of the Most High.'

Balwone interrupted. 'I have heard of the things of Massia in many of the ancient writings, so that such teaching could not have been confined to the Shemgridions.'

'You speak truly,' said Flamgrid, 'but the things written in the ancients are not all as Zemgrid and Sophius related them to me. He spoke of Massia as coming to be man amongst all men and to live with them and to die for them.'

'You must let me ask of these things,' said Balwone, 'that my head and my understanding may be clear. How could he who is a peer of the Most High come as a man? That he be like man I would not doubt, but that he would become man from his higher estate is beyond my human comprehension.'

'Undoubtedly,' said the cobbler, 'yet most writings of the many tribes spoke of one who would come and bring peace and harmony to the kingdoms of men.'

'Theirs was a common hope,' said the knight, 'but the fulfilling of such hope is beyond human endeavour.'

Flamgrid nodded in agreement. 'You are undoubtedly right,' he said, 'but you lack what the older people and their later brethren—the new people of the Most High—taught in their writings. When you understand what they taught, it will clear your mind of your puzzlement and bring renewed hope and faith to you.'

He paused, and his words seemed to hang in the air of the sunlit glade. Balwone again felt a quickening of his blood, and tears close to his eyes, so that he blinked. There was the pounding of his heart which sounded as muffled drums in his ears in the stillness of the glowing glen.

‘You, Balwone the Great,’ said the cobbler, ‘were always a man of love. Love possessed you as it had possessed your mother and father, but whilst their love was born of the Most High, yours was a love other than that of Massia.’

Balwone remembered the impatience that had often come to him when the name of Massia was mentioned, and he knew now—with great clarity of thought—that he had been jealous of Massia and had hoped to heal the world by his own love before Massia could come and accomplish that great task.

He asked gruffly, ‘What is a love which is other than the love of Massia?’

‘Of a truth,’ said Flamgrid, ‘it is most difficult to say. All whom we call “human” were fashioned in their creation after the shape and form of the Most High, and so were like Massia himself. But Massia is from all time and before it also, and so he was one with the Most High in that communion which was more than we could have had with our Maker.’

‘You, Balwone, have always had the love which man has, but whilst it is a love that delights to give, it is a love that seeks also to receive. It gives often in greater sacrifice, but beneath it all, and above it all, it desires to receive for its giving.’

Balwone was troubled when he heard these words for he knew them to be true. They went as an arrow to his heart and pierced him, for he would ever remember his coveting the place of the one who sat upon the golden egg. He had given his life to reach the high peak of the holy mountain, and then—having reached it—he would not be resisted in his ambition. He had killed for love, thus proving to himself that his love had been no love.

He said slowly, ‘Flamgrid, my teacher, you are telling me that the love of Massia is a higher love than that which I knew and perhaps than all know.’ At the same moment he thought of the carefree beauty of Merom and her deep affection for him. He doubted that hers was a self-seeking love. Likewise the love of Gothlic would be as that of his own parents—always desiring to give and not to get.

Flamgrid was silent for a time. When he spoke there was sadness in his voice.

‘The truth the ancients tell us, Balwone, is that when the Most High created us he gave us the gift of love, a love that was perfect. Then—against this gift of love—men and women turned from their Maker to their own selves, and in that moment their love changed. It was divine love become human, and always that love desires to get as it gives. Whilst it was a gift it was pure, but when men grasped it for their own purposes it was changed. It was now not the love of the Most High.’

‘You knew,’ said Balwone, ‘that my love was not of the Most High. Why then did you not tell me?’ Memory came to him of Facius and Merphein. He thought intuitively, ‘They knew that love and they knew I lacked that love.’

He looked at Flamgrid and said, ‘Why did you not tell me? Why did my father and my mother withhold this knowledge from me?’

‘Ah!’ said the cobbler. ‘None can hear the judgment of human love and none can bear its unmasking. We must persist in such love until it betrays us. Then—and then alone—do we know its real nature and so its falsity. The ancients wrote of the golden egg of love, but their prophecies were born out of their dreams of peace. Never had the Most High promised peace other than by the coming of Massia. That he was to come in love you also knew from the Writings. Yet you hoped to accomplish by your own powers what he alone could do.’

‘As you say, master,’ said Balwone, ‘so it is true. Yet I mind the sorrowful fact that Facius and Merphein did not warn me, but, rather, encouraged me in my quest.’

‘They were of two minds,’ said Flamgrid. ‘They knew of the Shemgridions, and in fact they had met with them in the depths of the forests of Zed and Maignia, but to know the great love does not come from words told, or even matters reported, but by the revelation of the Most High himself. Your parents knew the same love as you did, but it was this other love they longed for. They encouraged you in your quest because they dreamed their son would be as Massia, and as they dreamed, so did their son. This is the reality men have striven for down through the ages. Also I will tell you this secret, Balwone son of Facius and Merphein: often when men and women are given over to the

Most High they have in strange and wonderful moments unusual experiences and manifestations of the true love of that Most High. In these rare moments they are as Massia himself. Why this is so I cannot tell, but there are such happenings; yet even the experience of them is dangerous, for then those who have had them become proud and they think this love to be of themselves and they revert to pride, so that in the very moment of true love they may sometimes revert to that love which is human, that which has deadly pride at its very heart.'

'Such love then brings forth only reptiles?' asked the knight in a horrified voice.

'It is well that it is seen as a reptile,' said the sage. 'It is thus that human love is unmasked and a new hunger is set in the heart of man for love that can never bring forth reptiles. It is hunger of the true love of the Most High.'

Although the fire needed no fuel, the aging cobbler stood and his hands took hold of a heavy branch which he dragged forward and placed on the fire. Then he turned to look at the knight of Zagon, the son of Facius and Merphein.

'You must know,' he said gently, 'that ancient prophecies do not all come from the Most High. They, too, must also be fulfilled that they may be seen to be of man and not of the Most High, so that men and women will no longer place their hope and faith in them. This is what makes way for the truth of genuine love—the love of the Most High. So it is a golden egg of love can possess many generations. Only when it produces a reptile is it seen to be from man and not from the heavens.'

'And I would see that love from the heavens,' said Balwone warmly. 'I would see it and know it and believe in it. Yet I have questions you must yet answer.'

'All questions I cannot answer,' said the cobbler. 'Yet, my son, ask on.'

'The golden sword, which was the word,' said Balwone 'how was it at my side in certain times? How was it that dragons and giants were afraid of it and even defeated by its thrusts?'

'Because the Most High was with you,' said Flamgrid. 'He is with all who would oppose evil and bring love to pass. He is not with us because we are perfect or even because we are high-

minded. He is with us because he understands our weaknesses and our errors. Also—as I have just said—our human love from time to time gives way to the divine. Against its own self it takes on its true ancient form for a moment of crisis. Then it resumes its forms of weakness and failure, but the Most High judges us not in these things. He desires to lead us to our death and beyond that death to life. All of this is what the ancients called "the grace of the Most High". The Most High is also called "the Most Merciful" by his true people.'

'This death I still do not understand,' muttered Balwone harshly. 'It is a mystery to me.'

'And ever it will be,' said the cobbler, 'for as it is to you, so it is to me. This means we must be shown that Massia has come and has done all things.'

Balwone stared at the sage. 'Massia has come and has done all things?' he echoed. 'Nay, Massia is yet to come.'

'Massia has come,' said Flamgrid. 'That was what Zemgrid told me at the time of his own death, and his words burned hotly in my ears and in my heart, and these years I have kept them there but I have not truly believed them. I have preferred to believe he had not come. I desired to believe only the wisdom of the ancients. They spoke of his coming but none said he had come.'

Balwone was now on his feet and his voice rang angrily through the glade. 'This Massia could not have come,' he said, 'else all things would have changed. Massia makes all things to change when he comes.'

The cobbler remained seated and his head was bowed. 'Massia has come,' he said, 'and Massia has gone. Yet he will come again.'

'Now I know this talking of yours to be all madness,' said the knight. 'Massia does not come to be here and then to go and then to come yet again. None of this has sense to it. I know now, Flamgrid, that none of us knows the true wisdom, for all our read-ing, our pondering and our praying. The true things are hidden from us by the Most High. I know now that we will never know.'

'Then it is time for you to come with me,' said Flamgrid, 'you and Roget, taking also Morna and Ballia with us. We

must make our way to those who will tell us of the coming of Massia, of his staying and of his death. They must tell us of destruction of death and his bringing of life to all when he comes again.'

'You are mad!' exclaimed the knight. 'You are mad beyond all madness! I was once betrayed to the death and now you would have me look upon that which has never happened. You would have me believe what is madness.'

'In the heart of the forest of Zed,' said the cobbler, 'is the place where the descendants of the Shemgridions live. It is they who cling to this thing which you call "madness". We must now go to see them and to hear them. They will surely tell us of Massia for that is their delight. They believe in him and they believe he has come. Indeed, that is their life.'

'How then is it that they have kept secret their wisdom all these years? Why have they not been hunted and brought to heel by our fathers who rejected their teaching and clung to the gods we have long known?'

Balwone's squire shifted impatiently. Then he stood. He addressed his master.

'With all my heart I desire this,' he said. 'Long have I listened in silence, but now my spirit warms to the word our worthy cobbler has uttered. My trust is in him though I be sorry he had not told us sooner.'

He turned to Balwone. 'Be not angry, master,' he said firmly. 'If thou art angry, and if thou art against what our master has said, then it may well be that thou wilt lose all thou hast been given as well as all that thou hast given to many. For the sake only of this, let us go hence. Let us go to these people and hear the story of their Massia.'

The knight looked helplessly at his servant and his mentor. He dreaded being again deceived, and in truth could no longer trust his own thoughts.

He looked into the beauty of the day and cool depths of the forest, and then he said, as though drawing a bow at a venture, 'Let us then go. There is nought that we have to lose. It may be that there is much we may yet gain. Flamgrid, I adjure you by the Most High, take us not on a foolish errand, but if what you say

you know to be true, then take us now that we may have done with all this mystery.'

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They rode in silence—the three men—and each in his own way was thoughtful. Morna, the old but still powerful mastiff, trotted behind them. It seemed to Roget that the birds had never sung songs so sweet, so deep and full-throated and so joyous as now they sang at the passing of the pilgrims. When the trees grew upwards where the path parted them, they let the light of the golden sun flow down on the soft grass and on the blossomed foliage and the ferny undergrowth, whilst the azure above them spoke of freedom that the spirits of men can know in their rare and special moments.

At noon they stopped by a great lake and they saw fish disturb the otherwise unruffled surface, and at times the scales of them flashed in the sunlight as they leapt upwards and then subsided. Water birds ran and chattered on the rim of the lake or darted across the water to catch an unwary fish. The great swans glided gracefully, tracing patterns such as dancers do on a smooth surface, and around them fussed their young. The ducks rose and flew above the lake, sometimes diving after their prey, disturbing the occasional silences with sounds of triumph and delight.

At this noontide the men refreshed themselves with food and drink and then were ready to mount their steeds again. Balwone thought he had never seen such beauty nor known such gentle silences as they were having in these their travels. At times his weary spirit so possessed his body that he would nod and even drift into soft sleep, only to be awakened when Ballia would step over some obstacle or utter some snicker of joy. For the most part the three men proceeded without much conversation.

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Mid-afternoon Flamgrid heard his friend say suddenly, 'It must be madness—this venture of ours. These people of the Most

High would long ago have broken out of their forest fastness to share with the world the coming of their Massia. Such they could not contain to themselves. The news of Massia—the high good news—must be told to all the world. Why then, and how then, has this not been?’

Flamgrid agreed. ‘Yet, in truth, this they have always sought to do,’ he said, ‘and throughout our northern kingdoms there are those who are secret believers. For fear of death they may not speak of their belief since the power of the old gods and lords is still seated in our lands. Whilst the old beliefs have crumbled away, yet the forms of power in high places have not greatly changed.

‘There are those who from time to time leave this forest protection and go to kingdoms in the south and the east and the west where the worship of the Most High prevails. The good news of Massia is found in such places and the servants of the Most High have freedom to proclaim their true wisdom.’

‘I still find it to be a strange thing,’ said the knight. ‘Truth is truth, and if what you say is the truth, then how can it be suppressed even by cruel persecution?’

‘You will see,’ said Flamgrid. Then he paused. ‘We will see,’ he said with some sadness. ‘I, too, long to see what I have long yearned to view—I who have lacked the force to drive me to this place.’

Balwone gave a keen glance at his mentor. ‘I had thought you would long ago have plunged into the mystery of these people. Did you then fear the powers of our kingdoms? Were you then afraid of death?’

‘It was not fear of death,’ said Flamgrid. ‘I was always in the belief that Massia had not come and that these people had erred in claiming this to be so. I was one with Facius and Merphein and others, that you were born to be the servant of Massia and that you would be successful and triumphant in your quest for the golden egg of love. From time to time we were uneasy at some of the modes of your life, and even more uneasy because we had seen manifestations of the divine love in those who were secret believers in Massia. Many of these were not Shemgridions but nevertheless believed their word and went on their ways.

‘Balwone, I confess to you that we have long been in this state of unknowing and indecision. Otherwise we would long ago have believed what we dared not believe for it seemed such madness to us—that Massia has already come. Even the older people of the Most High would not believe that. To this day they do not believe it, and they are scattered among the many nations, holding to their claim that Massia has not yet come. They regard the new people of the Most High as heretics. They place so much upon Massia’s future coming that they cannot accept the claims of the Shemgridions.’

‘I fear then that our venture is a foolish one,’ said Balwone gloomily. ‘Even now I would turn back, for what your foster-father said, and what Sophius also told you, sounds not true to me. But of course we must go on and see what this day brings to us.’

His was a protest; yet in his heart was that sliver of hope, the faint line of joy that all the cobbler had said of the people of Massia was true. Dark thoughts still troubled him, but he would not now have withdrawn from their pilgrimage. Dragons and giants would not prevent him.

He felt the rising tide of hope, but beneath that tide were other dark waters which pervaded his spirit, bringing a coldness of terror which he feared to face. Something within him kept muttering, ‘Massia has not come!’ and once he thought he saw the movement of his old enemy the dragon, as though he were passing silently through the forest along with them, but half-hidden. Indeed, he imagined he could catch a whiff of the deadly stench of his ancient enemy, but, if anything, the sun shone more brilliantly above and the songsters trilled, warbled, carolled and fluted their music so that it seemed all was joy and that only tranquillity lay ahead of them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## The People of Massia and the Most High

THE PILGRIMS heard songs that transcended even those of the forest birds. The songs were human; lyrics unaccompanied by instrumental music but in glorious harmony. There was a singing in major key that thrilled the hearts of the three men and raised something of passion in their spirits. Ballia held his head high at the sound of it all, and Morna loped along in sheer delight. Roget's eyes gleamed and his own horse picked up its forelegs as though it were prancing, and Flamgrid's mount followed suit. Balwone saw that the eyes of his mentor were glistening with tears of joy, and in his own heart there was the drum again, muffled but pounding away, and he could sense that his own tears were not far from being in unison with those of Flamgrid.

So they broke upon the clearing—a clearing unprotected and unguarded by human hands and weapons. There they saw humble dwellings made out of forest timbers, branches, wattle and clay daubing. The houses were low-roofed, set around in a circle of a large compound. On the eastern side was a building longer, higher and wider than the rest, which the newcomers sensed to be a place of worship or community eating. In the doorways of some of the houses were women with babes in arms. They had come to see the visitors, since such visiting appeared to be a rare event and one in which all desired to share. Elsewhere, in various places on the compound, were folk at different occupations such as winnowing, grinding grain, cutting billets of wood and working at spinning and weaving, but all were singing or talking as they applied themselves to their industries. Balwone sensed

they were sharing a communion that seemed to be one of love, joy and peace. Flamgrid was watching them with a gaze of de-light. For him this was a community such as he had not hitherto seen, but of which he had often read and sometimes dreamed.

Roget's face lighted up and he dismounted from his horse, running towards the group of people as though he were returning to his family—a family long known to him. The two other men dismounted and walked towards the centre of the busy arena. There they were met by older men—those who appeared to be elders of the group—and they were warmly welcomed with a personal embrace. When the embraces were completed, the three men were taken to a place where there were tables and benches, and they were invited to be seated. A youth came forward to take care of the three horses, and Morna trotted along too, feeling at home with these people.

The leading elder introduced himself. 'I am Shemmaker, leader of our family,' he said gently. 'So I ask for the others—do you come as friend or foe?'

Shemmaker was a tall man with a grizzled beard, a thick thatch of greying hair, a suntanned face and piercing blue eyes. His weather-beaten skin was smooth, although it was evident he was an old man. His voice was warmly vibrant and his eyes bespoke a lively spirit. Balwone was deeply impressed by the presence of this leader. Flamgrid was no less impressed, and replied to the question.

'We come as those who reverence the Most High and his servant Massia. My name is Flamgrid, and this knight beside me is called Balwone. His squire is Roget, and we have come to hear the message that is dear to the heart of your people—the good news of Massia the Lord.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Shemmaker. 'It is a blessing indeed to have you come, and to welcome you. Often folk come to us from afar to hear this message concerning Massia. We welcome them with love and we share what we have—and what we are—with them.'

He bowed low to the three men, then with a flourish of his right hand indicated the other elders.

'These you will come to know,' he said cordially. 'They are Shemwith, Shemthath, Shemian and Shemiath. Doubtless they

will wish to converse with you. As you may know, we have deliberately hidden in this forest, for many are our enemies, and the monarchs of this and surrounding kingdoms view us with some hostility. Yet we know that Zemgrid and Femgrid were of our people, as indeed we understand that you, Flamgrid, were born abroad in the family of the Shemgridions. We welcome you as friends even if not as fellow full believers. We believe the Most High would have us all meet in this way.'

On that saying the three men and the elders regarded each other thoughtfully. Mature in years but younger than Shemmaker, the other elders were sturdy of frame, homely and plain, and Balwone surmised from their rough hands that they were hard-working. The clothes they wore were plain, and no doubt of cloth spun and woven by the women of the community. Even as they talked the women and men had resumed their industrious labour.

After a short silence Shemmaker turned to Flamgrid. 'Your name, sire, I have long heard. You are one of the great sages of our days. Wisdom is a great gift from the Most High. You, knight of Zagon, we have known to be one who seeks the love of the Eternal. The news of your squire has also reached us. We know him to be a simple man of grace.'

He smiled, and again there was the flourish of his hand, but this time it covered the entire compound. Its people had now grown still, their labours suspended, their lyrics hushed and their quiet and gentle gaze centred upon the visitors.

'These are our brethren, those who are of the new people of the Most High, those visited by Massia in his coming from the Father of all celestial light and of every true earthly light.'

Balwone felt a thrill run through his body. He knew the singing had deeply affected him, as though his spirit had broken through into a new dimension of experience, and he trembled at the beauty and the wonder of it. The sight of so many firm and yet gracious eyes almost undid him, but he gazed back at all in silence.

Flamgrid said clearly, 'We have come after many years to discover whether it is indeed true that Massia has come to our world. This we have often debated and, as you know, our kingdoms will not receive this claim as true. Even the wise among us

who believe Massia is to come cannot believe that such an event has already taken place. One of the reasons for this is that the ancients prophesied that when the servant of the Most High—Massia—would arrive, then, through him, all the world would be changed, and men and women would live at peace, and love would come to the hearts of all.'

Shemmaker smiled. 'What you say is true,' he agreed. 'That was what the prophecies had always said, but perhaps some of the prophecies were simply the desires of men's hearts uttered in human hope and yearning. The old people of the Most High—those to whom he had given a covenant and a land and a great worship—had prophets who spoke similarly, but then with one great difference. They prophesied that Massia would not be received in his first coming as the King of Peace. They said he would be accepted by some but despised by others, and that he would suffer greatly and eventually be killed.'

As Balwone heard these words it seemed that something cold gripped his heart, and for fear he could not take his gaze from the speaker. The words 'Massia killed!' brought terror to him. It seemed that Shemmaker sensed his horror for he glanced curiously at the knight, but then went on fearlessly.

'Our Massia was killed, and in a terrible manner, after the worst form of judgment of the day. His foes exulted at his defeat and decease, but although truly dying, he defeated even death, for the Most High raised him to life again.'

The coldness about Balwone's heart greatly increased. His spirit could not receive these statements of Shemmaker. He longed to burst out in protest, but Flamgrid began to speak.

'I have long heard of this coming to life reported of Massia,' he said, 'but others have said he revived from the pangs of death because he was a greatly resilient man and wonderfully strong in spirit.'

'He was but a man,' said Shemmaker calmly. 'He was a man like us, and no more even though he was the peer of the Most High. What would kill another man would also kill him, for he was truly human. Think not that his divine origins gave him a special power that took him beyond his humanity. He chose such humanity that he might be one with us.'

Balwone interjected. 'Massia, the ancients tell us, is the peer of the Most High, and when he comes he will be as strong as that Great One.'

The chief elder nodded. 'You speak truly,' he said. 'Massia was and is the peer of the Eternal, but he chose to become man, and being man would not—indeed could not—use the celestial powers which were his. He chose to do what was necessary for his brethren: to die for them.'

Balwone was disappointed and voiced his feelings. 'To die is but to show our mortality, and we are told that death is a thing deserved by our failure to worship and serve the Most High. At the time of the beginning we were all of one man, and in him we rejected the Most High.'

Shemmaker stared back at him, his eyes now intensely blue, as though there was fire in them. Balwone knew this man to be strong in faith and wisdom, and—he doubted not—in love.

'What you say is true,' the elder agreed. 'We all deserve to die, but this one did not deserve to die. It was this that made the difference between him and all of us—all of humankind. His death was intended to bring life.'

Balwone felt helpless to argue further and he lapsed into silence, being greatly troubled. It was then that Flamgrid took up from his pupil's words.

'We, too, know that death is not the ending of all things, but we greatly sorrow when one goes from us. We cannot be sure concerning what happens after death. We have many ceremonies intended to help those who go from us, but there is great uncertainty of what lies beyond this life. What, then, is the mystery of this one's death, and how can a man defeat death and rise again?'

'It is indeed a mystery,' said Shemmaker. He lowered his body to be seated on a bench and the visitors did likewise. The humming and the chattering and the singing recommenced in the community. Balwone felt peace flow around him in waves, and Roget had thoughts that he had come to a heavenly society. He was not so much interested in the conversation of his two friends with the elders as he was in watching the people at work. After a time he left the discussion and joined those who were working.

Shemmaker took up his thread of discussion. 'All concerning Massia is a mystery. There are those who say men dreamed of such a one who would come and make all things well. They say that Massia is an age-old image in the mind of many tribes. The wise men spoke of him, and the longings of many were woven into this mystery. Such a one would have to come. Even so, it was the old people of the Most High who had the prophecies given to them, and it was in accordance with these that he came. It was in conformity with these that he was born, grew, lived, taught and did great signs and wonders, and it was in line with these he met his death without anger and passed to be with the Most High. He came back from death to tell us he had defeated it and that henceforth all men could live in the life of the Most High.'

For Flamgrid it was as though the weighty traditions of the wisdom he had learned were as the grass of the prairie which would curl up and die when the fierce heat of summer would come. It was as the clouds which gather to give rain but vanish without any outpouring. He felt the thinness of what had once seemed substantial to him. Likewise Balwone felt the same, and the cold gripping of his heart by fear increased.

'How can we know this Massia has come?' he asked pitifully. 'What are the proofs of his visitation?'

'The proofs are,' said Shemmaker, 'that men hunt us down in every part of the globe. They fear the power of this one. They dread the death of their gods, their lords, even though some of them are dragons and death-dealing giants. They fear Massia—even though he has gone from them. They fear he will change the times and seasons of the nations and infringe the age-old rights and systems of masters and servants, and landowners and the poor whom they hold in bondage. If they fear he will do these things, then surely he is not dead. Again, all men fear death, but this one is stronger than death, and if so, then he has taken the power of the idols and of the gods. It is for this they fear him, for if the idols and the lords and the spirits are defeated, then the ways in which the nations live must also be changed.'

Balwone felt a thaw in his heart and a warming of his blood as though life was flowing freshly in his body. These were the

things he had thought of Massia, and the words of the chief elder were convincing to him.

‘Having gone,’ he said eagerly, ‘when will he come again?’

‘We know not,’ spoke another of the elders—the one called Shemwith—a sturdy man with hair as black as jet, and whose dark eyes gleamed with joy as he spoke. ‘He may come today or tonight; it matters not when, for he is present with us, even though unseen. His unseen life is brought to us by another who is both his peer and the peer of the Most High.’

‘You speak of the great Spirit of Massia and the Most High, do you not?’ asked Flamgrid. ‘Is he not the one who gives life and breath to all things and reveals to us the secrets of the Most High?’

‘He is that one,’ said Shemwith. ‘Without him none can understand the mystery of the creation of all things nor the wisdom of the Most High.’

Shemmaker interrupted gently. ‘Now we seek to share the mysteries of the Eternal, but all must not be spoken at once. We would refresh you, our friends, with a little food and drink since you have come a long distance this day. Tonight you shall join our worship and hear the saga of our people and witness the power of love in our midst.’

With that the elders arose and took the three to the capacious hall they had seen as they had entered the compound. Shemmaker explained that it was here that the community worshipped, ate and shared its life. Women brought them mead made from honey and spices, and cakes that had been lately baked for they were still warm and fragrant. The conversation they had begun at the benches was not opened afresh. Instead the elders spoke of the way of life of the community, and the three men listened with interest.

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Shemmaker told them that throughout the world of men and women there were such communities. In some lands—such as those of the northern kingdoms—the communal societies had to be hidden from the knowledge of the rulers, for many refused the

knowledge and rule of Massia. Even so, there were many tribes who had embraced faith in this servant of the Most High and they worshipped and served him. The idols had been burned, the old shrines had been abandoned and new ways of living had taken over.

He explained that from time to time the devotees of the idols would rise up and seek to restore the old patterns of living which had been fragmented by the new faith, but without avail. Massia was triumphing in many a nation. They had hopes that gradually the kingdoms of Zed, Manignia, Cathrid and Flagland and others of this northern region would come under the sway of Massia. The chief elder’s blue eyes became gentle and soft as he talked, and it was as though in those moments of his speaking that he saw a fresh vision of the ultimate day of Massia’s triumph.

‘Many of us may have to die before this can be so,’ he said, and as Balwone heard these words the coldness came back to his heart. He knew the strength of the old ways and systems of the northern kingdoms, and felt that any initiative the Shemgridions might have had, had long ago been lost. They would never again have the opportunity to bring their message of Massia’s advent into this world. Partly this was because the older people of the Most High had been caught in a lasting enmity by the nation they had sought to serve, but which had expelled them or were persecuting those who yet remained.

With this in mind Balwone addressed Shemmaker and the elders.

‘If, because of the former covenant people of the Most High, our northern nations oppose religion which will bring their gods into discredit, how can you now bring about a change in the thinking of our nations? You are but a weak people, hidden in the forest.’

Shemmaker looked the knight clearly in the eyes and replied, ‘It may be that converts like yourself must go back and start a fresh wave of understanding. It may even be the will of the Most High that many of us should die for the faith. When there are deaths, then life can come. Perhaps the two things shall come together—your faith and our martyrdom. Then all things will change.’

The knight stared back at the chief, his own heart now almost frozen.

‘We are not yet convinced that Massia has come to our world. Whilst we are in this mind, then we can never win the ears of our fellow knights and princes. The common people will make no move until we do, but first we must be convinced.’

Shemmaker gave a quiet smile. ‘You have not come here on your own impulse,’ he said. ‘Had you not come to the end of your own wisdom, then you would not have sought us out. We have been here these many years, and Flamgrid—for all his wisdom—left us alone. He neither reported our whereabouts to Gothroyd nor sought to prevent our way of life. By nature he was on the side of the kings, but whether he knows it or not he is of our tribe and may well come to believe as we do.’

‘As for you, Balwone the Great, your destiny has always been to bring the love of the Most High to this world and to be the faithful servant of his peer and son, Massia. You had to make your journey through the territory of Allein to the holy mountain, just as you had to wander footloose many a year in the kingdoms of this world. Now you will come to the true understanding of Massia, and your heart will be held forever, as are indeed the hearts of all our people.’

The knight of Zagon looked helplessly at the leader of the elders and their people—the Shemgridions.

‘How can I know all these things to be true which you tell me? How can I now change my thinking after all these years of my pil-grimage, the outcome of which is still a matter of deep pain to me?’

Shemmaker smiled. ‘Tonight will resolve your doubt. Tonight you will share in our worship and come to our liberty. After that your heart will be free, and the coldness it now knows will give way to a great freedom.’

Balwone was puzzled, but he noticed that Flamgrid was smiling softly, whilst Roget glowed with the experience of friendship he was now having with the Shemgridions. He crumbled a cake in one hand and fed it into his mouth. He drained the rich mead and felt a glow within. Something was convincing him of the elder’s words, but at the same moment he dreaded what lay immediately ahead.

The three men left the meeting house in order to tend their animals and to refresh themselves as guests who waited for the evening and its simple promise of new things which would come to them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## Massia's People and His Revelation

The forest trees blocked off much of the closing evening, but there above was the pure blue, slowly darkening, whilst clouds to the west were piled in masses that were being touched with the westering sun. Almost in a moment light blazed upon them, filling their fleecy softness with a glorious crimson and soaking the air with a warm glow. It lasted only for a moment, and the blaze died as the sun plunged down behind the clouds and let the sky slip into a mauve and then into the first touch of purple as the night came floating in.

The community hall was aglow with flickering lamps, simply pottery saucers with wicks in the tallow oil. The eyes of the diners seemed to shine as they reflected the simple light. There was a hubbub of sound as adults sat at benches and children nestled into the straw and rushes against the walls. Soup that was like a thick stew was ladled into large pannikins, and when Shemmaker had prayed over them and the morsels that went with the soup, then the hubbub broke out again.

Roget sat with the children, his back against a wall blackened over the years by smoke, and he seemed to be in an ecstasy. Flamgrid and Balwone sat with the two main elders, Shemmaker and Shemwith. The others were scattered through the large family of the community. They supped enthusiastically together and little was said.

It was when the meal was finished and the business of cleansing utensils completed, that the community sat back with what Balwone discerned was their expectancy of a rich evening. Shemmaker had manuscripts of which the two scholars had not

heard before. They were amazed at the rich wisdom, admonition and encouragement which issued from them. When the lections were completed, Shemmaker arose and stretched his arms high, his fingers extending to their limit, and he began a long prayer which Balwone deemed to be a family one. Many names were mentioned and many petitions made, but all of these were preceded by high adoration which moved the three strangers deeply.

The petitions finished, the visitors heard the growth of murmuring which was like that of a cluster of bee hives. The sound rose as the people prayed corporately, each praying personally, with all praying aloud. Flamgrid was obviously astonished and his head nodded from side to side, as he approved of what he was hearing. Balwone was feeling his lack of personal, intimate approach to the Most High, and he realised that much of his knowledge of that One was self-centred. It was as though he had never turned outwards in utter surrender and adoration to the Maker who had given him life. Now his self-restrictions were dissolving, and when he began the murmur of a prayer, he felt a delight enter his soul.

Roget had slipped into the pattern of the community and his head was bowed as he worshipped with a new and wonderful adoration. Here and there in the room a man or a woman had an instrument of music. Some were those the knight had seen in castles and palaces and on his journeyings, but others seemed to be of more ancient origins. After a time there came a low and gentle strumming and humming which broke into gentle singing, and then achieved a beautiful harmony which rose and fell until the knight felt he could bear it no more, so sweet it sounded in its simple tunefulness.

In the midst of it Shemwith arose and lifted his arms as Shemmaker had done. His great thatch of hair fell around his face, and he seemed to be as an angel of mercy, for he pronounced blessing after blessing on the community, and they received such with unfettered delight.

Then it was that the newer singing began, newer because it was not corporate. A tall, thin man with hair falling down to his shoulders, and whose eyes were dark and shining like pools in

the reflection of the tallow-wicks, began a song which Balwone thought must have come out of the beginning of time. Its words of praise to the Eternal kept telling of creation when all creatures sought to admire and adore their Creator for what he had accomplished.

When he had finished that song, one of the elders, Shemthath, stood and took up the same tune, but his words took on deep sorrow and darkness. Underneath them was a brooding anger, and sometimes there seemed to be violence in the phrases he used. The two men of wisdom—Balwone and Flamgrid—understood this to be fury against the Most High, and they ached within. It seemed that they shuddered in their bones, so distressed were they that humans could live in such evil. Then a cold loneliness swept across the room, and all within it were silent. Both men heard the words of the saga—that in those primal days the rebellion against the Eternal had reached dreadful heights of passion and was expressed in forms of human wrath and evil temper. Out of this the gods and lords and their images had been formed and had come to have power over their devisors.

In his continuing song, Shemthath took them away from the anger of men, and began to sing gently of the mercy of the Most High. From somewhere—both men knew not where—a chorus of exceeding beauty began to swell and, with its swelling, all there joined the song. Even Roget seemed to understand what it was about for his eyes shone with the lustrous tears of joy as he became one with the worshippers about him.

Following the song, the community chanted as though they had been trained to sing by rote. To Balwone's ears it was like the marching of a great army; like the thundering of mounted horsemen; like an invasion of angelic creatures which throbbed with a high and triumphant paeon of power and authority. Balwone felt his skin tighten and he held himself together by an act of sheer will. He was so moved that he could have leapt into the air and cried aloud, time and again, as though he could not hear such magnificent triumph and at the same time not express it.

At one time he was sure they were in a desert. He seemed to see the tall palms and behind them the moon and the lustrous stars. His mind saw rolling sands and a vast community making

its way across it. Then he felt their entering into a land which was to be their own. So the song was sung, and so it was taken up time and again by a chorus of support.

Away at the back of the hall was another elder who was entering into the singing. He took off from the last words of his fellow elder, and his song was inexpressibly sweet. It was singing of the type that the three men had not previously heard in all the time of their human living. This music seemed to voice a longing that Balwone knew to be in his own heart and which Flamgrid had often confessed to himself and even to the Most High. It was not that the music merely expressed a longing, but it universal-ised it. All men and women, and all young folk—boys and girls—must have that longing at some time or other in their lives.

The singing of desire gave way to the high music of comfort that seemed to pour down upon all from above. As Balwone listened he noticed Shemmaker had made his way to his side. He moved along the bench in order to give the man sufficient room, and Shemmaker gripped his right arm.

'These are the songs of the ancient people of the Most High,' he was saying. 'These are the songs of their triumph and then of their brokenness. Serving the Most High was no easy task, and often they sought to flee from the Great One and find peace with idols, but the sorrow of idols cannot be measured. Love and joy and peace leave the idolater. Terror and burden possess him.'

Balwone realised the elder was interpreting the song, for the words were slurred or their accents were strange, as though they were coming from the ancient people themselves through the channels of these later people who sang.

When a woman rose and began a thin, sweet song, Balwone asked his friend what it was about. Shemmaker said it was about suffering; about the pain woman has when she brings a child into the world. Even as the elder described it, the thin music changed to an expression of joy. Again, there was a throb to the song, and music in it seemed celestial in that it rose higher than the spirit of man which rarely knows such joy and love and triumph all together.

After a time there came a break in the music and the singing. It was time to tell stories to the children, and one after another fathers and mothers rose to address the whole community. Balwone discerned that the stories were told without pointing morals. The community was doubtless as any similar communi-ty, in that all were human and, so, faulty. Already he had seen parents disciplining their children, and he had seen minor fights between the youngsters, but there was also a freedom to be real in their humanity together. He could not define this freedom but it was there, without doubt.

He realised the stories were teaching whilst they entertained. He remembered the yarns his father used to spin to him when he was small, and the beauty of his mother's instruction through telling of various events of the day, and even of days that had been. So he relished the homely ways of teaching that this community was sharing.

Following the stories the mothers took their children off, each family carrying a dish of oil with its lighted wick. The hall then seemed to be like a cavern—so much light having gone. The childish chattering and the occasional whimpering had ceased, and a quiet peace fell over the group, which was mainly com-posed of males—men young and old, with boys who were deemed to be part of this second stage of the night.

After a time the elders came together to discuss community matters and the other men held conversations that flowed freely. Roget seemed to be filled with pleasure, whilst Flamgrid pursued his discussions with Shemmaker, who had drawn off from the elders in order to talk with the famous sage of Zed. Flamgrid was able to give the leader news of the court because of his foster-brother, Bengrid, and foster-sister, Semgrid, who still worked at the palace, even though they were ageing. He was able to reveal the unswerving loyalty of Gothroyd to the traditions he had inherited. Balwone edged near to hear more of the conversation, but after a time he tired of this and went out to one of his favourite diversions—to stare at the stars.

The night was still and pure. The air was clear and the stars shone with crystalline luminescence. Something would rise up within Balwone when he beheld the beauty of creation—be it at

night or in the day. Around him he could hear the murmuring in the wattle and daub huts of parents and their children, then after a time all grew still. The air was becoming crisply cold, and the knight thought of going back to the warmer building of the community hall.

He would have done so, except that a vision of sorts appeared in the sky. At first it seemed a movement of silver stars, a brilliant reforming of the astral whole, but Balwone was dismayed to find it was forming into the shape of his old enemy, the dragon. Light began to form the eyes of the dragon, glowing deeply with fierce intensity. Then the face appeared, with the strong jaws, and long teeth. Fire began to emit from the nostrils, and then he saw in a phosphorescent shining the great bulk of the loathsome body.

The arms and paws of the scaly creature were lifted as though to reach out and take the knight. Balwone felt no fear, but he loathed the stench of the reptile. He waited for the usual sneering accusations of the fiery beast, but this time there was no sneer-ing, only a deadly prophecy.

'You are bringing death to this place,' said the dragon. 'It will be their life for yours. While there is time you should withdraw. You and your fellow travellers should flee, and leave these ones to their own ends.'

Now the sneer came, and the accusation. 'You are so obstinate you will never heed a warning. You will let these others suffer because of your selfishness. What good did you do the one who nourished the golden egg? What good will you do these here who accept you so simply?'

Balwone on this occasion was at loss for words. He felt at his side for the sword but it was absent. Its absence brought a pang to his heart, but he remained silent. Then it was a voice spoke from beside him.

'Begone, foul creature!' cried that voice, 'begone in the name of the Most High and his glorious servant Massia!'

The knight recognised it as the voice of Shemmaker. A flood of relief came to his spirit. Here was another man who could see the dragon, and a man for whom it was not the inner experience of the soul, but merely a creature foreign to him. This man—to

his great joy—was one who had authority and power in the presence of the cursed visitant.

Shemmaker was persisting. ‘This is holy ground here,’ he was saying. ‘This is the territory of the noble and holy Massia.’

Balwone fancied he saw the spangled creature shiver or shudder. He sensed fear in the angry monster. Even so, the beast answered Shemmaker with a snarl.

‘By tomorrow you will speak in a different voice. Tomorrow you will see how weak you are when men are incited to oppose and destroy you.’

The cold fear Balwone had known—the fear that had been banished in the warmth of this lively community—now returned, but with it was also the heat of a great anger. He would have shouted at the dragon, but Shemmaker raised a hand, pointed it towards the beast and said with a strong voice of authority, ‘Begone, foul creature. Go back to your abyss of iniquity, and trouble not the holy people of the Eternal One.’

Balwone was amazed to see the beast shudder even more deeply than before and, as he watched, the thing above that had formed its being from the stars began to withdraw. The outline of its bestial being dissolved, and the sky was again pure and clear. If anything, the heavenly bodies gleamed and glowed brighter than before, but the power and presence of the dragon had dissolved.

The knight turned to Shemmaker. ‘I am grateful to you,’ he said. ‘Only twice has another seen that dragon when it has appeared to me. It has been told me that it is but some fantasy within me showing itself in this outward form. Flamgrid and Roget have seen it, and you have seen it.’

‘All evil is a mystery,’ said Shemmaker, ‘and few of us can really know it. I trow that we have worse things than such dragons within us, so evil we can be. Yet we also have things more glorious than anything in the heavens for we are made to be like the Most High and to have communion with him.’

‘Communion with him!’ whispered Balwone in a mixture of awe and delight. ‘That I have never read in all the ancients.’

‘Since the dawn of time,’ said the elder, ‘even though we have rejected him—the Eternal—some have felt drawn to him by a

power they could not resist. When they came close they learned the joy of a union of which they had not dreamed. Then union passed into communion, and so they have come to know him as their Father, as well as their Maker.’

At this news Balwone trembled. His heart seemed to melt within him, and his body was as weak as water. He felt he could scarcely stand, but Shemmaker linked an arm with one of the knight’s and quietly drew him towards the meeting place.

‘Tonight the tale will be sung,’ he said, ‘and this you must hear, that your heart may come to know the mystery of Massia.’

Balwone felt strengthened and drew joy from this wise and calm old man. He marvelled that there was a place on this earth, and even in the kingdom of Zed, where dragons could find no resting place, but travellers and pilgrims could know an instant peace. It was true that this rude camp was holy, and evil could not take power or derive polluted sustenance amidst such purity. He liked the warmth of the arm within his and he allowed gladly himself to be seated amongst the elders.

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At first the great hall seemed dim, but he perceived that at the eastern end there was a man seated, and he had an ancient instrument of music in his hands by which he was to accompany the song he was about to sing. Balwone noted with astonishment that the man’s throat was similar to that of a frog when it inflates itself for deep utterance.

‘It is one of our special singers,’ said Shemmaker. ‘The developed inflation of the throat brings a resonance that cannot otherwise be. The skill of such singing is passed down from generation to generation. It was thus before even Massia came, and the art is in worship of the Most High. It is a good singing. The great story will soon begin.’

Balwone realised then that such a song was not sung every night. This man had come from afar, having been sent by another community of the Shemgridions. He was as a prophet, although his song was not to prove predictive. It was a song of the saga of the Most High in creating mankind and in persisting with those

who, in becoming evil, had sought to cast off their Maker and be their own masters. It was a song that spoke of Massia's coming and his triumph of death and of life.

He heard some sighing as the tuning of the ancient instrument proceeded, and then the first few flutelike notes fell into the audience and caught them as though into a spell. Balwone was wondering what would happen to a dragon or a giant who might come under such power as it was presently being expressed.

The man sang on. First he told of the creation, and then of the rebellion of creatures which had been born in light but desired to become things of darkness, for quickly they had come to hate the shining glory of the Holy One. The songster told of the days of the ancients and the divisions amongst them as they made their gods, for without them they could not worship, and worship—whatever its form was, and is—is a passionate thing for all human creatures to do.

He also sang of the formation of the ancient people of God—of their laws, their traditions, their forms of worship and their community life. Although he sang such details they seemed all to be as precious jewels that one would take and store—never to lose them! It was as though the audience in the hut was transported back to ancient times and lived them—with the ancients—before their Lord and Maker, the Most High.

Then came the music that brought sobbing with it, and Balwone felt his heart take up the pain of the times of idolatry and false worship, and the departing glory of the people; the Most High taking himself from them, and then the crashing doom of the judgments and the terror of the community as slayers came amongst them and as their temple was torn down, their brothers and sisters and parents raped or slain or transported into exile—some never to return.

The truth broke home to Balwone that the Most High was a Holy One and that his judgments had to be, and that in some way they were acts of mercy, even in spite of the pain and dread of him that had brought them.

So the singer sang on. It was when he spoke about the prophets and vocalised their ancient utterances, that the knight's heart beat furiously—far beyond his control. An intense joy came into

the singing, and the instrument played a deep and rich music. The prophets were now telling of Massia and his coming. Balwone felt sick with excitement, and when the birth of Massia was described he knew in his heart that it must be true. Simple as was that birth it had moved all the celestial creatures to break the bounds of their unseen world and proclaim to mankind the glory of the event.

Because the story was new to him, Balwone wondered that all in the building did not leap to their feet and give great cries of adoration and thanksgiving, but he sensed that they had had their day of such rejoicing and so he let his heart run freely in its joy, as also he allowed the tears to flow silently from his eyes. He wondered about his two companions, but since he could not see them he listened with increasing avidity to the song of the man with his instrument of music.

At the same time a voice in him was crying with trembling joy, 'Massia has come! Massia has come!' None who heard the song which was proceeding could cry other than 'Massia has come! Massia has come!' Even though Balwone had not believed in such a coming until this very moment, he knew it would be madness to deny the revelation which had come to him. He listened to the continuing song, but he knew his heart had been won from the old fragile love which had been his, won to the new love which was beginning to burn within him, the true love—the love which worshipped the Most High and his Massia, and the love which enveloped all who would enter into glorious communion with the Maker and Father of all creatures and things.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## The Love of Massia

THE MAN at the eastern end of the meeting hall played on. His instrument gave out its sweet throbbing notes, and the bladder-like sac of the throat swelled and subsided, inflated and deflated as its lyrics dispensed grace and love, terror and joy, horror and delight to the silent hearers. At times the three men who were guests of the community wanted to cry to the singer to desist, since the intensity of the thought, and the display of the holy action of Massia, were beyond their power to sustain; yet the very power of the message called them to persevere.

For Flamgrid the inrush of the wisdom of love was such as to transcend the wisdom he had gathered over the years. There was a new wisdom which embraced the old but transformed it into a new power, and in this wisdom he could see great hope for the world he loved. Roget had already—though without conscious effort on his own part—come to truth in simplicity and so the lyrics confirmed his plain acceptance of faith.

For Balwone the long song was different in its effects. His whole spirit was aflame with the unspeakable love of Massia and his Eternal Father. The birth of the simple yet superb visitant of the Most High was wonder enough, but when his exploits of power—exploits which were in themselves love—began to penetrate Balwone's understanding, then the love enveloped him as swaddling clothes warm and support a newborn child.

That sense of love did not die when he watched the death and passion of Massia. Horror grew, horror such as he had never known, and it was a dread more terrible because he knew that along with the persecutors of his new Lord he could have cried out 'Kill him! Kill him!' with savagery equal to the blood-crazed mob that desired his end. In those moments he knew the evil of the

human heart, and the world of men and women who rise up against their Maker. What saved him from complete madness was the sight of the women who watched with sadness and love the painful death of their beloved Massia. One of these was Massia's own mother. Few of his followers could stand and watch the epic death, either from the fear that they too would soon be taken and destroyed or the horror in their spirits which could not endure such pain of sympathy, such abject defeat of a mission that had shortly before promised glorious success.

As Balwone pondered the duplicity of the human heart and its savage enmity for the Maker who created it, a strange thing happened to him. The resonations of the singer and his instrument set up responding vibrations in the spirit of the knight of Zagon. Noble and chivalrous knight he no longer considered himself. As the parallel resonations accelerated and expanded, his body seemed unable to sustain the intensity that was coming upon it, and it collapsed. His body fell from the bench and lay huddled on the floor as though in the foetal position. He was curved into himself, and had he not trembled and shaken, had he not come as though into a violent ague, those who watched would have thought him to be dead.

Shemmaker placed his hands together and prayed silently to the Eternal One. He had no fear for the fallen noble. His heart rejoiced for he knew what was happening. He knew that this man had been transported back in time to the event of the death of Massia, and he did not pity the man in pain. That one heard the singing now as a background, but sight of the singer was gone and a vision of the man dying with his arms transfixed to a cross-bar on a pole was possessing him. The possession passed from simple regarding of the event to participation within it.

How this was happening he did not know, but it was as though he had come into the heart of the dying man. Around that one was a swirling darkness, a high rising of a violent wind, as great clouds of evil pressed down upon him. It was then Balwone saw the crazed hatred of the enemies of holy holiness. His dragon was there with his cohorts of other dragons. Giants of bestial features and heart pressed down upon the spirit of the

servant of the Eternal. Waves of foul stench swirled about the nostrils of the dying Master, and now his dying servant.

'I am one with him,' thought Balwone wonderingly. 'I, too, am dying in his death.' The evil hordes flashed their hatred at him from dark lustrous eyes, and all the offscourings of hell pressed in to destroy both him and the one in whom he was living and dying. The strange and wonderful thing was that this Massia had no reaction to the evil that would destroy them. His dimensionless purity opened itself to the inflowing tides of prurience and filth, and closed about them, locking them into himself.

Balwone knew in a moment that the pollution of defiled celestials and terrestrials of all ages was now meeting its doom. The simple purity of the dying man was more than sufficient to take the pollution and purify it in his loving agony. Far from enveloping him he was enveloping it. He took it in as a great sucking tide draws all within itself, and Balwone knew with gasping wonder the destruction of the contamination.

He felt more: he felt the weight of all human pain and sorrow, hurt and anger, heaviness of spirit and loneliness of being. He felt the dread alienation of every human spirit as life dies in it because of separation from the Most Holy One. The fierce wrath of that Holy Eternal upon the self-desecration of created holiness was manifest in the anguish that the dying one bore in his mind and heart, his spirit and his body. Horrendous waves of passion and emotion passed over the servant of the Most High as he bore out to its uttermost perimeters and bounds of pain the judgment of human violation of the Holy Maker of all.

Once—prior to this experience—his own spirit would have protested. It would have called for mercy on evil men and angels, but now it saw the justice of it all, the vindication and preservation of unspeakable righteousness. Without such the Great Deity would have been eternally defiled, and without it there would be no hope for any person to be created anew in his pristine purity and glory.

So the movement flowed on. In one way it stemmed from the powerful simplicity of the song which made no comment of the event of the man dying, but told the story of it in terms easy to understand. In another way it flowed from a communion with the

dying one which was both terrible and beautiful. Whilst Balwone did not feel the pangs as though they were his, he did feel them as though they were for him, and this in a way intimately personal as love through death was destroying the death of the one it loved.

One part of him within that death was feeling its reverberations and sensing its horror, whilst another part of him was entirely outside of it as a spectator looking up at the dying one. As Balwone looked up from under the timbers of death he saw the love in the eyes of the sacrificial victim. Nothing of judgment stirred in the eyes and spirit of this man. Nothing of self-pity was present in that eternal suffering. Then from him dropped goutts of blood upon the shuddering knight.

As the blood splashed upon him a transformation came into the heart and mind, into the soul and conscience, into the body and being of the huddled son of Facius and Merphein. He felt his heart voided of its evil, his conscience cleansed of its dead pollution, his mind purged of all that had been wrong and vicious, whilst his spirit so lightened that he thought he would fly upwards as do angelic creatures. The brilliance of light did not blind him, but it flooded him with sight that he had never experienced — sight of the Eternal in his glory and splendour and beauty and purity—so that now he was without shame and heaviness of human guilt.

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The song did not cease, but the content of the lyrics deepened—if that were possible—in substance and reality. The watchers saw the knight of Zagon cease his trembling as the shaking subsided. They saw him come back to consciousness. His eyes opened wide, whilst he lay for a moment as though in an ecstasy of holy joy. Then he rose to his full height, raising his arms in the sheer delight of a freedom previously unknown. He looked around him with shining eyes and gazed for a moment on those whom now his soul loved, and loved so deeply.

At the eastern end of this holy place the singer sang on. Balwone quietly seated himself upon his bench and listened to the

final stanzas of the magnificent song. The last lyric was of a man rising from the death he had died; a man scattering light into the cavernous gloom of mortal humanity; a man blazing a glittering trail right up to the feet of the Eternal One; a man assuring the human race of a future of glory and not of doom, a restoration to pristine nobility and—over and above creation and recreation—a gift of eternity which was beyond even the glory of man's original birth.

The last notes of the song died away and the instrument was silent. The gifted songster and musician sat in the peaceful silence that wrapped them all around, and the Spirit of Massia brought silent love and joy and peace to all who had listened. Flamgrid felt his life's pilgrimage had come to its longed-for goal. Roget felt an immense joy within himself and laughter that was mounting up and promising to overflow in riotous manifestations. Balwone knew his suspicion and envy of Massia had dissolved in that death, and that love had come into his being from the new life of that resurrection. His eyes shone with adoration and gloried in the simple silence that was about them all.

Then, without warning, without premeditation and purposing, the community rose and broke into singing. The spontaneous untutored singing was one of pure joy, pure love, pure liberty, and it flowed in golden waves of light that were worship to the Most High. Never had the three visitors heard such throbbing joy nor felt such pure delight. All sang the one song, and this without tuition, without any person leading. The lyric of praise made its own way through the group, dispensing its own words, all of which were resident in the communal heart of the community and found natural expression in the musical utterance.

Balwone felt with mounting wonder that the praise was not only of men but of divine beings who—though unseen—were joining with them and sharing the rapture that creation has when it sees its Maker and gives adoration to him for who and what he is. At such times the wonder of his being transcends all humanly inspired joys and delights. The very Being of the One before them draws out responsive wonder and worship, flooding as it does all hearts with filial affection and its own eternal love.

Such were the happenings of that night, and when the exalted men and women left to go to their humble houses, taking with them the flickering lights, it seemed to the three men that such delight could never again be so full and, certainly, never transcended.

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Shemmaker walked with them to the guests' quarters and entered the room, placing a lamp in a tiny alcove. Its gentle flame flickered and cast shadows of the men on the daub walls. All four men settled in the rushes on the floor—the beds of the three visitors—and for a long season they were all silent. In other huts there was singing as though spirits which had been awakened must exhaust themselves with love before they could sleep.

'Does this singing then go on forever?' asked Flamgrid when Shemmaker settled himself with them on the rushes.

The elder shook his head. 'We do not often have such nights as tonight. It was in the purposes of the Most High that it should happen and now it has happened. We did not know you would be here at the same time as the singer. But it has been right and good that it has thus happened. His name is Nappali and he comes from the East. In the East the faith of Massia is strongly established.' He sighed. 'These northern kingdoms are stubborn, resisting to the last, but they too will one day fall. Massia has said when all kingdoms have heard he will come again, even if they have not received the faith of him.'

'Perhaps they will listen to us now that we have come and seen for ourselves,' said Flamgrid.

A sad look came into the eyes of Shemmaker. 'I think not,' he said. 'It may simply be that we will die for our faith. Having seen us die some may catch fire. Some quiet believers may also become vocal and the fire may spread. There seems to be no other way.'

Balwone spoke quietly. 'I see nothing worthy of death. Persecution of the Shemgridions was never based on fact, for lies were told about your community. I see for myself that it transforms men and women into lovers of the Most High and lovers of men.'

‘This love,’ said Flamgrid, ‘is what makes mankind hate true believers. Whilst they can hate the Most High, and use their gods and idols for their own purposes, guilt lies deeply within for betraying the true Deity. Love for others is not part of their creed. All human creatures love what they wish to love, and for that love they demand their just returns. No: they will hate the love that unmasks them and makes empty their idols, and that portrays their shrines as foolishness.’

‘Meanwhile,’ said Shemmaker, ‘dragons and giants and fallen creatures that were once divine have set their warfare against man ever coming to the faith of Massia. If he wins they are lost—lost forever.’

‘Now that I know love,’ said Balwone, ‘I will gladly lay down my life for my new Lord, Massia.’

Shemmaker gave a quiet smile. ‘Perhaps that will not come to pass,’ he said. ‘It may be that you will have to live for him, enduring much pain, but by this bringing joy to many.’

To Balwone this sounded like a prophecy and it heightened his joy. In his spirit was a fine rapture, a heady carelessness regarding his life. It seemed that his former coldness of heart and his terror of the unknown was gone forever.

‘Take no sword,’ said Shemmaker. ‘Neither shall a weapon be given such as you have had on your pilgrimage to the holy mountain. There is now a sword in your mouth and with it you shall fight dragons and plague the foul spirits.’

‘And I?’ asked Roget, ‘What shall I do and be?’

A look of gentle sorrow came into the eyes of the elder. ‘You, too, shall suffer for your new faith, but your suffering shall not be without fruit.’ He paused, ‘We shall all here suffer, some of us even unto death, for tonight was the hour we had awaited.’

He turned to Balwone and his blue eyes held soft fire. ‘Now you are truly Balwone the Great. No, shudder not at that name, for since you accepted becoming Balwone the Least, you now have greatness. The love you knew, which was of man in his highest endeavours, has been supplanted by the love that is true—the love of Massia and his holy Father. It may well be that it is ordained for you to win the northern kingdoms. If Flamgrid be spared death for these last years then he will be your paraclete.

He will stand alongside you and encourage you and he will help to heal you when wounded in spirit. He who was wise beyond most men will now be wiser since he has come to know Massia.’

He smiled with the same gentle sadness. ‘For us, of this community, our days are almost fulfilled. Many of us will be scattered, but some of us shall take quick flight to the eternal abode where the children of the Most High see the face of their Maker and Father. It is enough that this should happen.’

The sounds of singing were dying. The men and women were now weary, and the children were, doubtless, already sleeping. As they lay back in silence on the rushes, the quietness descended on the compound.

‘It will be a holy sleep,’ said Shemmaker, ‘and such sleep fortifies for the morrow.’ He paused and smiled. ‘Who knows what the morrow will bring. This night the dragons have had no joy. On the morrow they will seek their revenge. Let us then sleep in the peace. Warring must ever be until Massia wins the nations and foils the dark enemy. Blood must be spilled, but its spilling can never mean defeat. He who has already defeated death and gives life to the faithful will not suffer his beloved to know any darkness of doom.’

Flamgrid said, ‘Now it is that the wisdom of the past comes to me in full truth. It is said that Massia would kill death and bring life to life for all his people.’

‘The wisdom is true,’ agreed Shemmaker. ‘Now you must let me pray for you and for the day to come, for it will be a day great in the annals of our history.’

The three men nodded gratefully. They turned their bodies and knelt on the rushes. As the prayer of the elder flowed over them so did further peace and joy flow into them. They could have endured the prayer had it to last forever, but this was not the case. It was sufficient that the old man prayed as a father for them, and their spirits grew even more confident as he interceded intimately for their future.

Finally they said a strong ‘Amen!’ to his petitions and his praise, and they followed him to the door of their hut. When he was gone they sat in silence for a time. It was the knight who extinguished the feeble light, and it was not long before the gentle

breathing of Flamgrid was overpowered by the stronger breathing of the squire, Roget.

For his part, Balwone sat, his head between his knees, thinking of the vision that had come through Nappali the singer. He knew its reality, its message and then its dissolution of his evil and failure. All this was printed indelibly on his memory and upon all his being. Of a truth—in the time of the song—he had been up on those rough timbers with his beloved Master, and that Master had forever purified him. His dread of dark monstrous creatures and—in particular—his fear of death were gone for-ever.

The scenes of the dying of Massia did not trouble him as they passed before his eyes, fresh in his memory. They brought him great joy and tears that warmed his eyes as they fell and dropped onto the thick rushes. He knew that this night—as never before—he would sleep a peace that would be deep and sweet—and it was so.

None saw Massia that night, and none knew that his spirit was over the place as he looked upon them in pity and love. Special intercession—the everlasting ministry of Massia—was such that they had no apprehension for the morrow—the day which was to bring forth things of such a nature that the creation itself might have shuddered in its anticipation.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### The Blood of Love

The dawn rose as a flaming banner over the forest. It broke into the wide compound and let its crimson light flow over all the huts, the sleeping animals and the machines of industry. Then its soft crimson gave way first to more golden light and then to the natural light of the morning. Men and women stirred as the first cries and demands of little children were made known.

The knight rose and walked into the compound. Fires were being lit and the morning smoke smelled good in his nostrils. Night, for humankind, was always a mystery—sometimes pleasant, sometimes torturous; this morning peace bathed all. Balwone washed his face and arms at a water point in the middle of the camp. Full casks were drawn upon for the early washing and drinking, and the morning gruel which the children and adults would eat.

Whilst preparations were being made for breaking of the fast, the knight wandered into the forest and marvelled that foliage had become to him even more beautiful than before. The early songs of birds were, if anything, more tuneful and moving, and even the rustlings of night animals retreating and day animals coming to life, had a music in them he had not sensed before. He knew his appreciation of the forest about him was the expression of the new freedom within his spirit. It was as though his eyes were now opened and his mind no longer oppressed. All his personal ambition to be a great deliverer had departed and with it the deep disappointment of his failure to do so.

In this contentment of heart and mind he returned to the camp of the holy community. Songs were rising again in many of the huts and he surmised some family worship was part of their day. His own devotions he had made in the forest. Now he joined the

folk as they sat on benches and shared the morning gruel. Roget had come with spiced bread and the flasks of cider which made their normal breakfast.

Shemmaker joined them and was pleased to share their rations. They talked of the night before, of their sleep of peace and the fresh promise of the new day. Balwone sensed that Shemmaker only half heard their conversation. It was as though his ear was attuned to some other sound or perhaps a sound for which he was waiting. Even so he was warm in his friendship and, after a time, talked of the industry which would soon begin.

Flamgrid suggested to the elder that they—the three guests—should soon be going. Shemmaker agreed with this but in an absent-minded manner, as though his mind was on other things. This seeming indifference was not misunderstood by his guests.

Suddenly, but quietly, the older man said, 'All around us, though unseen, are the proud spirits of fallen angelic creatures. With them is the great dragon and his offspring. Such beasts will not as yet appear to our eyes, but they are here to destroy us. They are here to put it into the minds of our human enemies that we are a menace and a threat to their kingdoms.'

For a moment the old fear of trouble came back to Balwone, but his memory of the death within last night's song came to him and he was set at peace. Flamgrid had that look on his face which the knight knew so well. It was wisdom bringing understanding, and for this reason Flamgrid also held to no fear. Roget, they knew, would concur with them.

Shemmaker was looking at the men and women as they commenced their industries of making meal, of spinning, weaving and carpentry. The hum of life was gathering strength and when it reached its peak the singing began, singing which was but the flowing on of the last evening's worship. Nappali had come to sit with them, and Balwone watched his throat first quiver and then swell as the music sac began its reverberations. Suddenly the song burst out and all the compound quietened in order to hear its message.

This song was different from that of the night before. It started where it had left off—with the triumph of Massia over death and over the sin and evil of creatures human and divine. It spoke of a

high throne and the ordering of all history from that centre. Massia and the Most High reigned together and they sent forth the Spirit of them both to bring revelation to mankind of their intentions and their actions. This revelation held both warning and promise: warning to those who would oppose the Most High, and promise to those who would remain faithful to him.

The tools and aids of industry were laid aside and the community of faith listened to the message of their Master. When the song ceased, and whilst its reverberations were still in the air, the men and women took up their instruments of work again and the humming and the singing resumed.

Shemmaker, Nappali and the three men sat together, allowing the warmth of the sun to soak into them. Yet in their peace was a thin edge of uneasy anticipation. The song had not promised protection from persecution, but had promised protection from ultimate destruction. Suffering and death might come, but those upon whom it came would not be marred in their being, in their spirit.

As in the unity of the people, the five men pondered these things, then Shemmaker suddenly became alert. He called for quietness, and a hush fell over the camp. Balwone fancied he heard a clashing in the heavens above but could not be sure of this. What was certain to all were the sounds that were coming from the forest. Distant yet from within it were the cries of men and hounds, and the faint tinkling of bells on the harness of horses.

'Cavalry,' said Roget.

'An army,' said Balwone.

'The army of Zed,' said Flamgrid, and his eyes were sad.

'It is the invaders,' said Shemmaker, 'those of whom Nappali has just sung.'

The remaining elders had moved across to Shemmaker and stood beside him. That leading elder raised a hand.

'First we shall pray,' he said, 'and then we shall commence our labours again. Not one of us will resist. This is the day we knew must come, and it pleases our Master that it shall be so. The suffering we will endure will not please him except it is true worship—the giving of our love to him.'

Balwone instinctively wished to rush to his hut but then he remembered the three of them had come in peace and so without armour and weapons. Also he remembered the words of the elder from the last evening: the only sword he would henceforth use would be the one in his mouth—his words.

All kept silence whilst the elder prayed for them. Some knew it could be their last hour and they thought of their beloved children. Others were filled with a peace not hitherto known to be of such nature and intensity. The elder prayed on for their eternal glory and not for their temporary safety. His prayer concluded with such praise to the Most High and Massia that all broke forth into singing and praising, and with great difficulty Shemmaker brought them to quietness.

‘You may sing now,’ he said gently, ‘but sing as you work. We would present a true picture to our invaders—a picture of harmony and skills used only for the blessing of mankind.’

After that he was silent, and the singing began afresh and it was in a natural manner and not after the former order of high and throbbing praise.

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Balwone watched as the army entered the camp. Leading them was Gothroyd and, to the knight’s amazement, Gothlic, the noble and beautiful daughter of the Zed monarch. The king’s helmet was richly plumed in crimson, and his escutcheon was in bold colours. Gothlic was also armoured, and it enhanced her natural stateliness. The knight of Zagon felt an ache in his heart for her, but she rode past him without a look.

Silently the mounted knights surrounded the camp, making a circle that guarded the perimeter that none might escape. On foot were the infantry and they held staves and swords. The cavalry had swords at the ready and their squires held pikes ready to hand to them.

When Gothroyd had taken up the centre place of the camp he called the community to silence. They ceased their singing and their industry and gazed calmly and steadily at their invaders.

The king began his speech.

‘This camp is forbidden by the laws not only of Zed but also of all the kingdoms of the north. You are followers of the Massia, and his heresies you would spread through our lands. You seek to destroy the gods and lords of our kingdoms, those who have brought prosperity and peace to us over many years. This rebellion and evil we cannot tolerate. Therefore today we will destroy you and your evil encampment.’

There was no whisper of protest, no voice raised against the speaker and no attempt to resist what was said or the things which might follow.

It was Balwone who broke the silence.

‘Great Gothroyd,’ he said, bowing low, ‘I am Balwone of Manignia, as you well know. Your servant Flamgrid is with me, and my squire Roget. We had heard of this place and were curious to know the rites and teachings of these people and so we came.’

The king remained silent, seated upon his steed. In a vagrant breeze the soft crimson plumage shivered. Gothlic, beside the king, was looking at Balwone in surprise. He was much moved by her gaze, but his heart was full of the matter of the Shem-gridions.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said respectfully, ‘our party finds no fault in these humble people. If you search their camp you will find no weapons. They are a people of true peace. They will lift no arms to oppose you. I ask of you that you leave them in peace or, if that is not your pleasure, then let them depart from your kingdom and find a place where they are permitted their own life and worship.’

The king looked at Balwone and, because his visor was lifted, the knight could see the sternness of his features.

‘Knight Balwone,’ the king began, ‘it was your king who invaded this kingdom and ravaged our people. Had it not been for Flamgrid we would have opposed him and great devastations would have been done. For this reason I have not forgotten my famous cobbler. By the same token I have not forgotten Zagon and his invasion. Yet this people whom you have visited are worse in their power and effects than all of Manignia.’

Balwone lifted a hand, as though to be permitted fresh speech, but the king shook his head.

‘Nay, Knight Balwone,’ he said, ‘you have ever had the seeds of strange wisdom in your heart and, having failed in your private mission, you have now become besotted with the heresy of this people. In truth they are atheists who oppose the gods and lords of true substance. They speak of worshipping one they cannot see but their worship is only pretension. Their aim is to destroy all gods and lords which are represented by our idols and images.’

Shemmaker made an involuntary move as though he would speak, but he stopped still and remained silent. It was Flamgrid who next spoke.

‘And it please Your Majesty,’ he said, bowing low, ‘that your servant the cobbler may speak. What I present to you today is not merely a plea for clemency to this people but to tell you the ancient wisdom had prophesied that Massia would come and the gods and lords would die at his coming. These are not the people who would destroy them. It has never been known that a person of Massia has ever destroyed an idol or an image.’

Gothroyd laughed harshly. ‘You do not speak with true knowledge, Flamgrid. You should know that it is not their hands that destroy idols but their speech. They have power with speech to make the idols look foolish and they attack our lords and gods as though they have no right in any kingdom. Their worship of the Most High precludes any other worship on this earth. Were they given power, the old lords and gods would be destroyed and then we would be invaded by the great dragon and his hosts, wrathful at the decimation of their powers. In that we would suffer sorely. No, Flamgrid, your wisdom is less than ours. We will not permit these to go free.’

Flamgrid remained silent, but Shemmaker lifted a hand to desire audience. The king nodded briefly and Shemmaker began his discourse.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said, ‘we are not a warlike people. Every day we pray for you and your courtiers and this kingdom. We pray for other kingdoms also. I am aware you will grant us no clemency and we ask none, for should you martyr us we will be transported immediately into the Presence of the Most High and

be commended by his servant Massia. We are a people who do not fear death.

‘Even so, I would warn you with all the gentleness of Massia. Firstly, do not harm this people, for their death will ever burden your conscience. For the remainder of your life you will never have rest. Secondly, if you spare these people in order to make them your slaves, then they will willingly serve you in all things but violence, deceit and falsity. They will never demand justice for they are people of love and prize it even above justice.

‘What I cannot promise is that if you make them your slaves they will not bring changes to your kingdom. What you say is true. Each has a sword in his mouth which is the word of Massia and his Most High. Men and women will be unable to resist the love of the Most High, and it is this which your subjects will see in his people—those whom you make your slaves.

‘I pray thee therefore, either let us go, expelling us from your kingdom or, in making us your slaves, live in the danger of your people becoming also the people of love.’

Balwone could see the anger of the king and that he was about to speak, but Shemmaker held up a hand that halted him.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said, bowing again, ‘your kingdom will become even more powerful than it is in these days. A people of love are now conquering kingdom after kingdom, and love and peace and joy are being brought to these new men and women of the faith. It is written that Massia will one day rule the whole earth in wisdom, peace and love. Would you therefore not give homage to him who is called “King of kings and Lord of lords?”’

‘Enough!’ shouted the king. ‘I will hear no more of these things. They are treason at its worst. They are subversive. By such things would you undo my kingdom and my people and expose it to the wrath of the gods and lords and weaken it against the other kingdoms who wage war on one another?’

Balwone left his place and walked up to the horse of the king. Because he had no weapons, and was dressed in simple forest-green linen, no knight sought to prevent him for he presented no danger to the monarch.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said, and he fought strongly not to look at Gothic, whose beauty on this morning moved him deeply. ‘Your

Majesty, I, too, have become convinced that Massia is our true Lord, the Lord of all the earth, and that he first brings peace to hearts of men and women and will bring all to peace with one another. I pray you, let these people go and even ensure they depart from Zed. I would happily give my life in forfeit for them and I trow that Flamgrid and my squire would do likewise. Take us and punish us in their stead, but do no harm to them for they are not violent people.'

The king turned to Gothic, and his fond gaze was upon her. 'What think you then, my daughter? What shall be the fate of these people?'

She stared back at her father, and her hands on the horses' reins shook lightly.

'I dare not say,' she said, 'for I do not know these people. This Balwone I do know, for I have seen him over many years and have heard of his exploits. If you let these people go they will do what they will—whether we think it good or bad. If you destroy them their spirits will gather strength and ultimately they will win our kingdom.'

'If you take hostage these three men and keep them in custody, then they, too, will affect their captors. In all truth, my father, I dare not to think of what will be the outcome of this day. My wisdom is less than that of Flamgrid and this prince of Manignia.'

The king nodded. 'These people will surely corrupt my kingdom if I allow them to live here. To take them into our midst will be to give them power of speech and persuasion. To let them go is to spread their heresy to other kingdoms and this we have thus far resisted. There can be no other decision than that they be destroyed.'

Balwone raised a hand. 'Her Highness has said that if you will destroy these people their spirits will be strengthened. Men and women will know of this massacre and these will become martyrs in their sight. The quietness of their death will be proof of the beauty of their life. I pray for these, great Gothroyd, spare them and destroy us in their place.'

The king growled and turned to his knight-warriors. 'How quickly a knight is infected with the softness of mind that he

would give his life for others! This is at the heart of the dangerous heresy, so I forbid any here today to destroy this knight, Flamgrid or the squire. Flamgrid will be imprisoned for betraying his country to this people. The knight and his squire will be driven from this domain, never to return again. I command now that this people must be destroyed. Spare none.'

Shemmaker joined Balwone before the king. He bowed in respect.

'Your Majesty,' he said, 'I concur with your decision. Massia himself has told me that this must be. I pray lenience on your part. First destroy us the elders, and then the parents, and lastly the children. Bring not so much pain to the parents.'

With that he knelt, as though awaiting the sword of the king. The king looked somewhat bewildered and turned to his daughter. Her gaze was on Balwone, and in that moment Balwone was sure he loved her. It was as though the king knew of this, and his desire in a time past was that Manignia and Zed should become united in the marriage of these two. Now his confusion grew, and so his anger mounted.

He lifted his sword, flourishing it—a sign to all the warriors, both knights and common men.

'First take Flamgrid and lead him from this place. You two of Manignia, take your goods and begone. Never shall you be seen in this kingdom except under pain of death.'

The whole camp was in the grip of a great stillness. There was not one beseeching look in the eyes of the men and women of the Shemgridion people. It was true that some of the children were uneasy, and here and there a whimper of distress could be heard, but the nobility of this homely people was not in doubt.

Balwone had not moved and his eyes were on the princess. He saw the bewilderment in her eyes and his heart took courage. The king, however, was enraged and he bent low over his horse and with his sharp blade severed the head of Shemmaker in one sharp, strong stroke.

His troops had lacked courage to undertake the slaughter but now they were constrained to make their first move. The blood lust that overtakes all humanity in war, with the mixture of guilt and anger that quickly compounds itself, took hold of them.

Gentle enough persons on the whole in times of peace, they now became raging maniacs.

Shemwith cried above the noise and the cries, 'Above the powers now exult! The dragons and the giants and spirits laugh at our destruction, but theirs is also coming. Be brave, companions of mine and servants of Massia. Show them truly how men and women of love die before their Lord!'

The members of the community were strengthened as the foot-soldiers rushed at Shemwith to destroy him. No sooner had he died than another elder would take his place and exhort the people. With his death yet another would rise until all elders were dead in a bloody heap. The soldiers seemed to remember the request of Shemmaker and they first attacked the older people, then the parents, and finally the children.

Balwone stood in horror as he watched the carnage, and in his spirit he moaned for them. He greatly desired that Massia would come and destroy the destroyers, but he was learning that this was not Massia's way. Every death was a new power set loose in this world, and he knew how he was being strengthened even as he was recoiling in horror at the evil of human blood lust. It was as though Gothroyd had lost the calm majesty which always presented itself both in times of war and peace. Now he was like a madman as he, too, continued slaying the innocent.

Some of the younger men and women broke rank with those who were passive, and they fled into the forest.

Gothroyd was almost maniacal when he saw their escape. 'After them!' he cried. Let none escape. If but one escapes he will destroy our kingdom.'

Balwone rejoiced at their escape. He believed the king's statement to be a prophecy. His gaze was somewhat upon Gothlic, and he thought he would hate her for not seeking to have the community spared. Yet as he observed her he saw tears in her eyes, and with a hand she was wiping them away. When she caught his gaze she returned her own as a person in terrible agony. The knight knew no woman could watch such devastation and be content with it, and as the princess saw the writhing of wounded bodies, heard the terrified cries of the children and witnessed the bloody carnage that made the camp a place of

unforgettable horror, he knew her love for her father had died. There was an appeal in her eyes to him; yet it was mute, and there was nothing he could do.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## A New Song Forever

IT WAS midday before the killing was completed. Some of those who had escaped were recaptured and, for the rest, the soldiers were going deeper and deeper into the forest. It seemed likely that some would escape and so the news of the massacre would reach the people of Zed and the other kingdoms.

Within the compound lay the holy dead. Little children stared with fixed gaze where they lay. Some of them looked up at their killers, and others to the heavens where they had believed Massia was reigning. Some had died with terror-distorted faces but, for the most part, the dead were calm in their end and lay as though at peace.

Now that it was over the king seemed ill at ease and not triumphant as he had thought he would be. Gothlic had turned her horse to the forest and awaited him in a quiet glade away from the camp.

Balwone made a request of the king.

‘Give us time to bury these dead and to pray over them,’ he asked, ‘for they have become our brothers and sisters, and our love for them is deep.’

The king gave him a hard and harsh stare. He sought to bring contempt to his eyes but failed, for in his heart was admiration for the three who had stayed to witness the slaughter and then to plead for a decent burial.

‘I shall order my men to inter these,’ he said. ‘It is the least one can do for an unresisting enemy.’

He shouted some commands, and the soldiers sought for tools to break the soil and bury the dead. They laboured heavily into the evening, and whilst they were completing this work, Gothroyd rode off to find his daughter.

None refused the labour of the three men as they toiled with the foot-soldiers. A couple of captured Shemgridions were brought into the camp and there killed. The eyes of the three men were on them with pity and love and encouragement as they died without terror.

\* \* \*

It was a strange matter that Balwone should find the princess before her father reached her. The knight of Zagon had slipped away to ruminate over the dreadful happenings and he saw the horse and rider in a quiet glen. The princess had dismounted and was seated on a log. He came and stood before her. She looked up at him, and he saw that sorrow was deep in her eyes. There might also have been some anger.

For a time neither spoke, then—as was fitting—she spoke first.

‘It is a sad day for Zed,’ she said, ‘and for me the saddest of all my life.’

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

‘I am ashamed of my father, our men and our kingdom,’ she said, and he saw the tears starting to her eyes. ‘I ought to have pleaded for the people but I did not think my father would really kill them.’

She looked at him. ‘Oh, Balwone,’ she said, ‘I had hoped that fate had planned something different for us. Now it is fated we shall never again meet, and what hopes we have had are baseless.’

His heart sang at her words for he knew their meaning. Had not the shock and horror of the massacre still been upon him he would have knelt at her feet and declared his love. As it was, a strange thought came unbidden to his mind.

‘One day we shall meet,’ he said firmly. ‘Fate plans nothing. It is the Most High who has the affairs of each of us in his hand.’

‘How little they have been in his hand this day!’ she said, with a spurt of bitter spirit.

‘Nay,’ he said, ‘but you are wrong. This day has not been a victory for evil. This is the day of their defeat.’ He remembered

the hatred of evil powers for Massia on the rude timbers of his death, and also the defeat of them in the powers of his love and purity.

'I have great love for you, Gothic, princess of Zed, and my love is not from myself, for myself. It is the love of the Most High and that love will never cease. I do not know his will for us, but I believe that one day we will both rejoice in it. More than that I cannot say.'

He longed to reach down to her and draw her up to himself, but he hesitated. He was now an exile from Zed, and to touch the princess would mean his death if her father or some other knight came. So he desisted. He bowed in respect for her position, whilst his heart was in anguish for her.

His last words were almost a whisper. 'Hate not your father or you will destroy both yourself and him. The newly dead are with their Lord in joy and peace and love, and they bear no grudge. Those who have escaped will take the message further into the world, and I will be one with them.'

He stood upright. 'In the last and at the last only love shall prevail,' he said. 'Yes, only love shall prevail.'

He went from the glen before Gothroyd entered it. That monarch found his daughter weeping and he was greatly discomfited, awkward in his attempts to comfort her. He could see she bore him no grudge, but he knew her image of him was greatly altered, and the regret that would give way to burning remorse was beginning to work in him.

\* \* \*

Balwone had an opportunity to talk with Flamgrid before he was led away. The soldiers guarded their hut whilst they conversed, and Roget stood outside also, awaiting his master.

'Be of good cheer, Flamgrid,' he said, noticing how the dread-ful day seemed to have added years to his former mentor's looks.

Flamgrid smiled. 'Life is now so full, despite the terrible massacre of this day. When I listened to Nappali last evening I knew that nothing in this world matters—nothing but eternal love. So my imprisonment will mean no great sorrow or suffering for me.'

My guards will become my friends, perhaps the friends of Massia also. Now I will write my own manuscripts for posterity. I will tell them of the stories of Shemmaker and the Shem-gridions. I will tell them of Balwone the Great and his painful pilgrimage, but men and women shall rejoice that all these came to knowledge of Massia and, through him, to the knowledge of the Most High—Father of all created beings.'

Balwone sensed the growth in the cobbler's wisdom and love, even at this late stage of his life. That the master would now inscribe his own pilgrimage, and that of his student, would bring life to many. He looked with joy on his old mentor, his mind going back over the many years of their friendship.

Flamgrid, for his part, was also thoughtful, he, too, remembering the years of their comradeship in wisdom. It was sufficient for him to see the newly transformed knight now dedicated to service of Massia, even though in disgrace with Gothroyd and almost certainly with the kings of other kingdoms. When Balwone shared the conversation he had had with Gothic, the eyes of the tired old man brightened.

'I had always thought it would be she,' he said. 'She, too, will become a daughter and servant of the beloved Massia. Give her time, Balwone, and it may be she who will bring Gothroyd and his knights to serve the Most High. Today will burn in their conscience until their guilt becomes intolerable. If you are wise, and do not provoke the king, then a new day may dawn in the northern kingdoms. Love is the way Massia works, albeit he also has his judgments; for love without justice is weak, and justice without love is the way of harshness.'

The two men embraced long and lovingly. When they stood apart, viewing each other, Balwone thought the cobbler of the blue eyes had shed some of his years and much of his tiredness. He turned away before the tears could come, and stumbled from the hut—one of the few the soldiers had left untorched.

\* \* \*

They did not put Flamgrid in chains. He was given back his own steed and rode with the entourage as they went from the place of carnage. He was to be taken to the royal castle and there interned.

Balwone knew he would be allowed his manuscripts, and perhaps be permitted to make shoes for the royal household. His writing would be a gift to the kingdom, and many would make pilgrimage to him to partake of his wisdom. Even now the knight knew the king had great respect for his sage and in the end would surely release him. If so, then Balwone might find occasion to go back to the old glade and share the adventures Massia was about to take him on.

Balwone had been permitted to retain the old mastiff and his white stallion. He mounted the horse without comment. Roget had been allowed to take his steed and the things that belonged to them. The troops had gone ahead of them, for knightly treatment had to be given to a prince of Manignia. Gothroyd trusted they would leave his kingdom quietly.

They had proceeded some miles when Balwone said suddenly to Roget, 'Abide here awhile. I will return quickly. Just await my coming.'

He quickened the vibrant stallion beneath him and they flew back to the place of carnage. Balwone dismounted and walked through the late scene of horror. The dead had been buried, the tools and instruments of industry shattered beyond recognition, themselves like skeletons that had been badly fractured.

He searched among the ruins in great hope and, to his immense —though solemn—joy, he found what he sought. It was the ancient instrument of Nappali and it was strangely undamaged. It must have been ignored as some kind of trash by the crude infan-trymen, but in it Balwone saw some hope.

As he stood there he knew the evil powers that had clashed above with great powers of purity had now retreated. A gentle tranquillity slipped into his soul. From somewhere came the assurance of continuing serenity, and the rich power of love so overcame him that he knelt and wept.

He wept for Gothlic, his true love, and he wept for the prisoner Flamgrid. Then he wept for the dead beneath him, though he knew them now to be above. He wept for the memory of his own human love and the destruction it had caused.

Even so, some understanding came to him. He saw that the sword he had plunged into the noble person was as the death he

had last night died with Massia in his death. Then began a weeping not just for himself, but also for the evil of mankind and the fallen celestial powers. Most of all he wept for the world and the human race, and the anguish and tragedy caused by human departure from the Most High.

As he wept there came the vision of Massia's death and his embracing of all evil for all time, and his destruction of it. Balwone rose from the soil where he had wept, and hope and joy shone in his heart even as the tears dripped from his eyes.

He looked down at the strange weapon of music in his hand and he plucked at one of the strings. A note came forth, and then another, and he fancied in his mind that many songs were locked away in the wood and strings of its being. He saw himself learning and becoming competent, and he fancied he would sing these songs throughout the world and bring the message of Massia to the same world—the message of love, joy and peace, so that faith and hope could be born, and massacres would cease in the face of such love, and peace would come to all the world.

## Glossary

### People, Creatures and Places

<b>Gothric</b>	ancient city in the kingdom of Zed
<b>Zed</b>	forest kingdom
<b>Flamgrid</b>	a man of great wisdom; lives in Gothric; orphaned as a child; also the sage of Zed
<b>Zemgrid</b>	foster-father of Flamgrid; cobbler; also orphaned as a child
<b>Femgrid</b>	wife of Zemgrid; orphaned as a child; of same travelling tribe as Zemgrid
<b>Bengrid</b>	royal cobbler; son of Zemgrid and Femgrid
<b>Semgrid</b>	maid-in-waiting of Queen Mabila; daughter of Zemgrid and Femgrid
<b>Queen Mabila</b>	queen of the kingdom of Zed
<b>King Gothroyd</b>	king of the kingdom of Zed
<b>Massia</b>	Great Prince to come; brings peace; man of love
<b>Cathrid</b>	kingdom east of Zed
<b>Paelfric</b>	king of Cathrid
<b>Zagon</b>	king of Manignia (name given to all Manig kings)
<b>The Manigs</b>	people of Manignia: a ferocious but cultured people
<b>Manignia</b>	kingdom to the north-east of Cathrid
<b>Endomin</b>	principal city of Cathrid
<b>Facius</b>	knight from Manignia
<b>Shemgridions</b>	race of wise people; people of Massia
<b>Sophius</b>	son of Pirinus
<b>Pirinus</b>	last leader of Shemgridions
<b>Morna</b>	mastiff hound belonging to Sophius
<b>Zagonholme</b>	castle in Manignia where Facius lived—just outside of Magnion
<b>Magnion</b>	chief city of Manignia

<b>Merphein</b>	wife of Facius; niece of king (Zagon)
<b>Balwone</b>	son of Facius and Merphein
<b>Husius</b>	brother of former king; Balwone squired for him
<b>Tartarus</b>	place of punishment for wicked
<b>Gothlic</b>	daughter of Gothroyd (king of Zed)
<b>Alwyn Firsini</b>	yeoman-farmer
<b>Edwin Corsini</b>	lord of the serfdom where Firsini lived
<b>Merom</b>	Firsini's daughter
<b>Roget</b>	Corsini's hitman who becomes Balwone's companion
<b>Cotillon</b>	city in the kingdom of Flagland
<b>Flagland</b>	kingdom to south of Zed
<b>Rougin</b>	another city in Flagland
<b>Peget</b>	inhabitant of the slum area of Cotillon
<b>Pequey</b>	cobbler in Cotillon
<b>Clanlo</b>	princess of Flagland
<b>Zenli</b>	prince of Cathrid
<b>Megafrith</b>	eldest daughter of Zagon
<b>Meerheim</b>	youngest daughter of Zagon
<b>Kanavah</b>	knight from Miridon
<b>Miridon</b>	kingdom bordering Zed
<b>Allein</b>	a jungle-forest on the edge of Miridon
<b>Ballia</b>	Balwone's white horse
<b>Clutterers</b>	winged-beasts in Allein
<b>Barbarer</b>	leader of the vanquished people within Allein
<b>Sarxia</b>	giant in Allein
<b>Erostika</b>	name given by 'Lady of Love' for mankind
<b>Lady of Love</b>	beautiful woman who turns into a giant
<b>Undeceiver</b>	another giant
<b>Shemaker</b>	leader of a group of Shemgridions
<b>Shemwith</b>	Shemgridion elder
<b>Shemthath</b>	Shemgridion elder
<b>Shemian</b>	Shemgridion elder
<b>Shemiath</b>	Shemgridion elder
<b>Nappali</b>	Shemgridion singer from the East